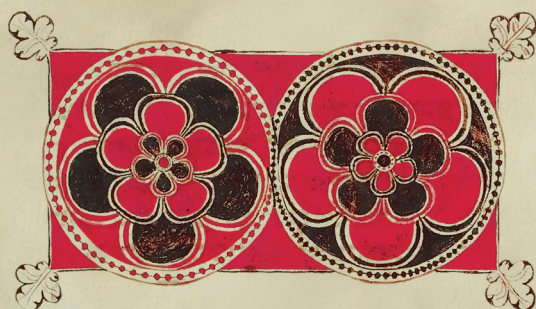
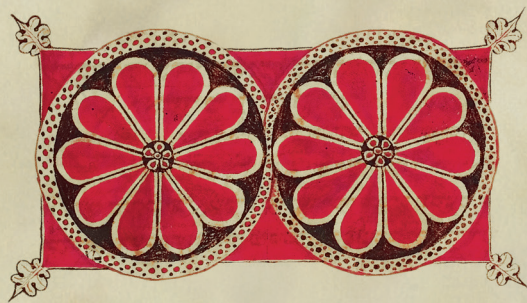




*Reading the Song of Songs
in a #MeToo Era*

WOMEN, SEX, AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE



EDITED BY

ELAINE T. JAMES AND SIMEON B. CHAVEL

BRILL

Reading the Song of Songs in a #MeToo Era

Biblical Interpretation Series

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Introduction: The Song of Songs and Women's Voices

Elaine T. James and Simeon B. Chavel

This volume on the Song of Songs aims to feature women's voices—in the biblical text, in scholarly approaches to the text, and among contributors to the volume. It has its origin in the public outcry of the #MeToo movement, which began in 2006 with Tarana Burke's MySpace post, and gained widespread recognition in 2017 after Alyssa Milano tweeted #MeToo about her own experience with film executive Harvey Weinstein's sexual harassment. The public face of the movement has since broadened and internationalized, spurring and joining with other activist movements like #SayHerName, #TimesUp, the NOW campaign in Australia, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America, and #KuToo in Japan. Powered by social media platforms, these popular movements have renewed public attention to very old, pervasive problems that pertain to gender, violence, and women's bodies and experiences. They have reignited public focus on the forms of subjugation central to second-wave feminism (sexual harassment, violence, rape, and inequities of opportunity and advancement), and have helped to show that they have by no means been resolved or settled despite some legislative advances that have come as a result of the organized political efforts of women and advocates of gender equity. It is a central conviction of the group of scholars in this volume that such concerns continue to have significant bearing on the state of biblical scholarship in the shaping of its practitioners and in the teaching and writing that make up the guild. Prompted by the revived public urgency around the problems relating to gender, violence, and women, the volume highlights and addresses women in public discourse, the challenges they face, and their voices.

Feminist biblical scholarship has long been concerned with issues of sexual violence, as has the literary field more broadly. The landmark publication within biblical studies is Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, published in 1984.¹ This text issued what was at the time a revolutionary call for the examination of the Bible's representations of women as subject to patriarchal violence. This call has been amply answered in the field, and critical studies of sexual violence have developed over the ensuing decades, taking into account varieties of experience as they

¹ Phyllis Trible 1984.

intersect with concerns about gender, rape culture, race, ability, and cultural position.² Feminist interpreters have had no choice but to address these issues, since the Bible is shaped by the ideological assumptions of an ancient patriarchal context, and since it includes so many narratives that allude to or explicitly thematize rape and sexual violence against women. The present volume seeks to extend this line of research, to consider issues adjacent to violence, including the gendering of voice, the nature of public discourse, and the particular experiences of women as readers. An ideal text for the framing of such issues is the Song of Songs, which has largely not been brought into the field's deep legacy of the critical examination of violence.

In the Bible, it is the Song that speaks most prominently about, for, and with the voices of women. The Song features the voice of a yearning woman in dialogue with a beloved other. The lovers' desires are mutually compelling. They speak rapturously of each other's bodies and long for each other's presence. At the same time, there are differences in the gendering of their desire; theirs is not entirely a relationship without power or the dynamics of difference. Her voice exerts more control over the discourse, actions, and the pace of the poetry: she initiates encounters, roaming the streets in search of him, and speaks in open, artfully constructed lines of the frank power of her desire. She is also vulnerable in her desire, wounded by it or because of it (5:7). His speeches echo hers, sharing in her metaphors and vocabulary, poetically "twinning" his lover, whom he describes in pet language as his "sister," even as she fantasizes that he were as intimate to her as a "brother" (Song 4:9–5:1; 8:1). But he spends more of his words in the enraptured attempt to describe her beauty. Looking at the lover's body in the Song is reciprocal and it is also participatory: she tells "stories" about the two of them, and imagines his body as a kind of mythic, enlivened statuary whose mouth she can taste—and it tastes sweet (5:10–16); he always puts himself in the picture of his descriptions of her (4:6–9; 6:5; 7:9–10 [Eng. 8–9]).³ The language of each lover's desire mirrors the other's but is not identical.

Who are this "He" and "She"? The immediacy of their voices makes them *seem* universal. But to speak of women and eroticism in the Song is to enter into its very particular, very ancient contexts and assumptions about gender and eroticism. Classical Hebrew is marked for gender and so the heteronormative

2 For an extensive bibliography on rape in the Bible, see Susanne Scholz 2010; and Rhiannon Graybill 2021; for a continually updated archive about the Bible, rape cultures—ancient and contemporary—and feminist activism, see *The Shiloh Project*, edited by Johanna Stiebert, et al. shilohproject.blog.

3 J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 23.

assumptions of this ancient text are manifest at the surface level of the text, though this worldview is not limited to grammar. On the one hand, the normativity of binary sexuate experience has been rightly challenged, especially in the West, catalyzed by the work of Judith Butler and others who acknowledge that gender, like many dimensions of human social experience, is not merely natural but is constructed. Readings of the Song that map the territory of these constructions and find space for its subversions are a crucial step (see Rhiannon Graybill, Simeon Chavel, and Martti Nissinen in this volume). On the other hand, the social crisis of violence against women—and the ongoing work of feminist theorists and activists—reaffirm the need for attention to the embodied experiences of women.⁴ Such a move to re-center women and women's voices should not be seen as a straightforward return to the theory and approaches of second-wave feminism. Rather, informed by queer theory and intersectional feminism, this volume aims to take the somatic experiences of different, particularly situated women's bodies seriously as a starting point (see Anna Marsh, Yvonne Sherwood, and Havilah Dharamraj in this volume). This volume does so in only a partial way and offers suggestive avenues for future such inquiry. To foreground the body is to affirm a common cause with all those whose bodies—including queer, non-binary, and trans bodies—are marginalized by patriarchies and subject to its pressures, powers, constraints, and brutalities.

One recuperable dimension of the Song for public discourse is its evocation of the sheer magnitude of eroticism. It is a power that cannot be subdued or contained by anything, whether social, political, or mythological:

For Death is fierce as love;
 passion is cruel as the grave.
 Its flares are flares aflame, a holy blaze.
 Swells of water cannot quell love,
 or even rivers drown it. (Song 8:6–7)⁵

4 It is certainly true that members of every racial, ethnic, cultural, income, and geographic group experience sexual violence, and that some groups, including trans and non-binary people of color, prison inmates, and Indigenous women experience sexual violence at significantly higher rates. Nevertheless, male aggression against women (both cis and trans) makes up more than ninety percent of sexual assaults, according to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, accessible at [cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf). Accessed August 12, 2022. See especially Section 3: "Sexual Violence Victimization," 15–82.

5 All translations are the authors' own, except where otherwise noted.

This inexorable power of erotic love, and the Song's unabashed, emphatic representation of it, surely stand behind the ancient idea that it was a wildly popular work and in need of tamping down. In one early Jewish discourse about texts a person may not handle casually (m. *Yadayim* 3:5), the foundational figure Rabbi Akiva safeguards it with a direct proportion: the Song of Songs is to Scripture as the Holy Holies is to the Temple compound. In another (t. *Sanhedrin* 12:10) he spells out the implication: the Song's appeal is a snare of eternal magnitude; rather than sing it like an everyday ditty, people must treat it with the awe and dread due the Holy of Holies where the divine resides or risk the afterlife itself. Coming full circle in a third discourse (b. *Yoma* 54a), R. Qetina returns the Song's eros to the sphere of the gods where it belongs: on pilgrimage days, he says, Israel would see inside the Holy of Holies, where the cherubs were enwrapped in sexual embrace, and the priests would pronounce, "So does the Omnipresent love you!"

For early readers, as for the Song's many readers throughout its history of interpretation, the Song's power is clearly a function of its eroticism. The Song has generated an immense number of commentaries and treatments, possibly more than any book of the Bible, and over its long history, readers have reveled in it. At the same time, the Song's power is circumscribed and sublimated through the enormous volume of allegorical readings that turn the Song's eros towards God, even while such readings continue to attend to the most minute sexual details, re-articulate them with graphic verve, and do so to queer effect.⁶ The heightened attention to the Song's own sensuous surface in allegorical interpretation produces some complex readerly dynamics with respect to women's voices. On the one hand, the largely masculine history of the Song's interpretation tends to subsume the feminine under the auspices of the male religious imagination (see Deborah Green in this volume)—so much so that scholars have seen fit to critique the male gaze *in* the Song as yet another reflection of male obsession with and endless portrayals of women's bodies, sexuality, and desirous availability.⁷ On the other hand, the Song has also been a critical text for women readers such as Teresa of Ávila and Hildegard of Bingen (see Karl Shuve in this volume), who subscribe to the Song's authorized interpretation as an allegory that privileges the masculine, for whom it also becomes a model and pretext for their own voices as women.

In the late twentieth century, beginning with Phyllis Trible's pioneering work, feminist scholarship took up the Song of Songs, and largely found in it a

6 Stephen Moore 2000.

7 For discussion and overview, Julie Kelso 2012.

celebratory counter-text to the Bible's patriarchal androcentrism.⁸ This ongoing project of feminist interpretation is seen in the one full-length feminist commentary on the Song of Songs written by a woman, J. Cheryl Exum's *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (2005). But such inquiry has to some extent dwindled in recent decades, occasioned perhaps in part by a trend of disaffection with the Song and a heightened sense of cynicism fostered by the "hermeneutics of suspicion," feminism's classic stance (see Elaine James in this volume). There is a renewed need in this moment for a return to feminist criticism in order to build new and potentially liberative pathways of interpretation, informed by the tools of queer and intersectional reading. Other points of connection include the disciplines of philosophy and ethics, which issue a perennial call to reexamine traditions, giving attention to their implications for interdisciplinary, humanistic insight (see Sarah Zhang and Chip Dobbs-Allsopp in this volume). The Song has always been a marginal text, even for the broader discourses of feminist biblical criticism, which have centered largely on the misogyny of narrative and law. Feminist biblical criticism has work to do in re-centering this marginal text—poetic, elusive, and distinctly if not unproblematically feminine—reconsidering its ancient contexts, its vast array of historical interpreters, and its potential interlocutors in contemporary art, literature, theology, and politics (see Fiona Black and Karen Guth in this volume).

Drawing on the energy and vision emerging from the increased public awareness of the political movements around violence against women, in June 2019 an interdisciplinary group of scholars came together at the University of Chicago Divinity School to consider the singular Song of Songs as a site of and a vehicle for women's voices. This conference was called "Let Me Hear Your Voice! Women, the Song of Songs and Public Discourse." The lectures and deliberations were then made available online (<https://voices.uchicago.edu/songofsongs/>), but a set of themes and concepts emerged and crystalized to drive a more robust volume, which would differ from the conference in three ways: (1) Contributors would orient their studies around the shared themes and concepts. (2) Contributors would draw on each other's work. (3) The pool of contributors would expand to include new voices—conference respondents and fresh voices altogether. In the resulting volume, this book, contributors address the question: How do readers approach the Song in a #MeToo era? They also reappraise the nature of the Song and its assessment as erotic literature. While sex is often thought of as a "private" matter, what are its implications for various publics, and for our collective discourses around identity and justice? To

8 Phyllis Trible 1984, 144–165.

that end, contributors also address the questions: What are the Song's publics, both within the poetry itself, and in its contexts of reception? How do contemporary perspectives on gender renew feminist considerations of the Song?

Contributors represent diverse perspectives on the nature of "public(s)" and the ancient text. The volume features women scholars who come from different continents, statuses in the discipline, ethnicities, religions, and methods. The essays consider women, gender, and the problematic of the public within the text of the Song and its readerly reception. This work represents a reinvigoration of feminist scholarship on the Song and a significant contribution to research on gender and the Bible. In what follows, we will trace several trajectories of discussion. The hope is that this will highlight significant contiguities and show how there is much potential for mutual illumination in the various considerations here.

The volume is organized into sections along two axes, navigational and modal. The opening essays orient the volume conceptually and the rest follow in historical order for ease of navigation. The essays are also grouped to highlight different modes of interaction with the Song, theoretical, historical, and as a resource in and for contemporary experience. But there are shared themes across the sections, including a mutual concern for the lives and experiences of real women that generated the initial conversation.

The volume opens with several essays that examine the literary character of the Song in light of the concept of "public(s)." The first essay, by Elaine James, makes the case for a renewed feminist consideration of the Song of Songs. It takes up the work of contemporary philosopher Kate Manne, who argues that the distinction between "sexism" and "misogyny" sheds analytical insight on the pervasive experiences of women in patriarchal contexts. This distinction helps to reframe feminist considerations of the Song of Songs, shifting toward a more expansive, non-hermeneutical approach that accounts for the affective experiences of readers, especially women. Such an approach creates space for dialogue across the disciplines of philosophy, affect theory, and queer studies that open onto new possibilities for considering the text. In particular, this essay addresses the various ways that feminist scholarship has dealt with the troubling text of Song 5:7, in which the young woman in the Song goes out into the city on a nighttime search for her beloved:

They found me—the guards prowling the city—
they struck me, they wounded me,
they took my garment off me,
those guards of the walls. (Song 5:7)

James argues that a reparative reading of this text can both acknowledge the misogyny witnessed to by the text while also acknowledging the text's power to present a counter-text to the overt sexism of other parts of the biblical canon.

This dovetails with Rhiannon Graybill's argument in her essay, "Sex in Public in the Song of Songs." She draws on the theoretical work of Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner in their classic essay "Sex in Public." Their argument is that sex and sexual intimacy are not private matters—though they are often mischaracterized in that way—rather, sex is performed in front of others in the world of the text and in relation to the text. Signifiers of this within the world of the text are the watchmen and the daughters of Jerusalem. The presence of these figures, along with a refusal of some of the normative structures of sex that are central to the ideologies of sex in other biblical texts (reproduction, traditional kinship structures like marriage), suggest that the Song might be construed as offering "queer counterpublics." Such counterpublics offer possibilities for a queer-informed feminist discourse despite the hegemonic heterosexuality of the Song. The Song offers a kind of counter-territory within the canon that might usefully be read for queer purposes.

Simeon Chavel's essay develops this notion of the "public" from Berlant and Warner in his essay, "The Speaker of the Song of Songs and Her Publics," which re-examines the poetry's voicing. In Chavel's reading, the coherency of the Song's voice is not an accident of editing, but is an aesthetic technique developed through the conjuring of the dream-state, in which the female speaker is both authoritative and subject to the elusive disjunction of the dream. The manifold structure of the Song positions the individual dreamer in the pervasive presence of others, from the separate characters within the dream, through the audience of the dreamer, to the audience of the work. The manifest presence of these parties signals the female voice's awareness of the public nature and implications of love despite its simultaneously private, intimate qualities.

Sarah Zhang's essay addresses the public quality of private speech through a literary analysis of chapter 5. For Zhang, there are deep moral implications of speaking—which is not merely interior thoughts externalized, but rather constitute linguistic actions with profound moral implications, and thus require ethical accountability. Her work draws on the philosophical paradigm of Emanuel Levinas, who argues that the predominant ethic is one of other-orientation, that foregrounds the realities of love and relationship as the ground of justice. Zhang focuses, as James does, on the poem in

Song 5:2–8. Zhang argues that the moral framework of this poem emphasizes not self-interest, but the bearing up of the other in public speech. One of her points of focus is the repeated theme of the woman's adjuration to her friends:

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved,
tell him this:
I am faint with love. (Song 5:8)

For Zhang, this adjuration to a public (the young woman's friends) constitutes a contrast to the more self-interested speech of other parts of the Song (e.g., 5:3–4) and ultimately might be read as a kind of ethical norm that seeks to promote an other-oriented justice based on love.

F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp too orients his approach to the Song through the lens of philosophy that offers an ethical orientation to the other. Dobbs-Allsopp engages the work of Hélène Cixous, and especially her concept of "*écriture féminine*," ("feminine writing") and the discursive possibilities this might embody. The theoretical framework that Cixous provides helps to flesh out the sense of the Song's discourse, which is marked in a variety of ways as a self-constituting text that privileges women's experiences "loving love" as a central orienting principle. If the Song is an exemplar of *écriture féminine*, as Dobbs-Allsopp suggests it is, then it stands as a testament to writing that in its self-possession, stands over against malignant and oppressive social and cultural practices, and suggests ways that the Song might still have untapped political potential for transforming the way that we relate to one another.

From here, the essays are organized in a more-or-less historical order. In section two, essays engage the Song in various historical contexts, from the background of third-millennium BCE Akkadian love poetry, moving forward through rabbinic and early Christian literature to the medieval interpretation of Hildegard of Bingen.

Martti Nissinen's essay "Female Voices in Akkadian Love Poetry" calls attention to texts much less well-known than the Song, drawing out various dimensions of female voicing so prominent in the nineteen Akkadian texts that are known to us many centuries before the earliest possible date of the Song. In noting how these human and divine female voices are gendered both in consonance with and in distinction to the "gender matrix" of ancient Mesopotamian patriarchy, Nissinen is also able to trace their similarities to the Song. Especially in its use of the dialogue form, the thematization of the female gaze, and in its metaphorical vocabulary (including metaphors of "king," "shepherd," "fruit," and "garden"), Akkadian love poetry bears clear resemblances to the Song, and helps to illuminate it.

Leaping forward into the rabbinic era, Deborah Green considers an early moment in the Song's reception history, *Song of Songs Rabbah*. She argues that the context of ancient Judaism left very little room for women in educational contexts (and limited forms of representation in texts) so the interpretation of the Song comes mediated through the male lens of the early rabbis. While some of the rabbis do show a marked sense of empathy toward their female characters, on the whole their allegorical mode of interpretation effaced women's voices even in the Song. Her essay, "Recovering Women from the Scholars (Even from Me)," charts some of the ways that male voices responded to and even muffled the distinctively feminine character of the Song, in particular for a kind of reader they never envisioned—a woman scholar.

Karl Shuve takes us forward to one of the Song's earliest known notable female interpreters of the Song: Hildegard of Bingen. As Shuve shows in his essay, "Singing the Song Anew: Hildegard of Bingen as Interpreter of the Song of Songs," Hildegard's eleventh-century work (especially in her famous text, *Scivias*), both engages and reimagines the dialogues of the Song in light of the feminine divine figure *sapientia*. This work blurs the lines between translation and commentary, and takes up the Song's dialogical structure, privileging female voices as they mediate Hildegard's divinely-inspired vision. Shuve shows how the "public" for Hildegard is political and charged: while she was the head of a female monastic order, she did not envision her audience as primarily women. Instead, she envisioned its audience as high-ranking church leaders (men), which was realized in a reading of a portion of *Scivias* at the council of Trier in 1147, a council attended even by the pope. In such ways, Hildegard's use of the Song suggests that it provided an exemplar of public, dialogic, theological engagement.

In the final section, interpreters test the Song's potential in light of different contemporary paradigms and contexts, asking questions about feminine agency and voicing in light of various "publics." These essays not only bring the Song to bear on contemporary questions about public discourse; they also ask us to revisit the Song with a stance of curiosity toward the nature of its own ancient framing of gender, voice, and discourse.

The first of these essays is Anna Marsh's exploration of canon-formation and the tricky dynamics involved in bringing women's experiences into public spaces. Her essay, "Women's Voices and the Cost of Going Public: The Song of Songs, Canonization and Safe Spaces," examines the peculiar question of the Song's canonicity in light of the hearings surrounding the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. Marsh suggests that the Song's long history of allegorical interpretation deprives the voices and experiences of the women of the Song, and bringing forward these women's experiences in

the “public” moment of canon formation is fraught with such costs to those women. The analogy of the “whisper networks” around contemporary issues like the *Shitty Media Men* list, which have very notable costs for women when they become public, provide a provocative context for thinking about the durative nature of the problem of discourse in public.

Following this, Havilah Dharamraj takes an example from twentieth-century India in which the very public (media) assessment of a “private” affair has over more than half a century had lasting interest and lingering repercussions. In her essay, “The Gendering of Sexual Agency: Case Studies from Song of Songs 8:5–14 and an Infamous Indian Trial,” Dharamraj takes a famous 1959 court case in which a naval officer, a popular and public figure, shot and killed the lover of his ethnically British wife. The case has been a pervasive site of cultural reappropriation—a new artistic representation of the case has been created in every decade following the verdict, including a critically-acclaimed 2019 television series. Dharamraj argues that the text is culturally viable in part because of its complex presentation of issues of marital jealousy, a theme that is also part of the poetic structure of Song 8. For both of these texts—the one a relatively fixed written one and the other a dynamic cultural reproduction—a patriarchal context has particular bearing on the exclusivity of lovers, seen from the angle of feminine experience. To what extent the public voice can allow or castigate manifestations of female desire and jealousy is a matter of consideration and debate.

For Yvonne Sherwood, the Song’s history of interpretation has by and large not emphasized the “public” nature of love but has instead focused on its quality as sensual and “private” erotic poetry. In her essay, “Space and Regulation in the Song of Songs and Contemporary Sexual Politics,” Sherwood argues that the Song itself both is intimate and includes many potential “publics,” whose political implications can be traced through the stark contrast it provides to contemporary sexual politics of surveillance and aggression against women’s bodies. She adduces contemporary examples in a deliberate juxtaposition to the Song, including the #MeToo movement, the politics of child marriage, and the continued assault on women’s reproductive rights. While not arguing that the Song is exactly a pristine or unproblematic site of women’s agency, Sherwood nevertheless suggests how the Song’s sensibility privileges the feminine voice, which is both inward—and outward-looking, saturated with the larger natural world, and stands as a counter-text to the oversaturated, under-examined experience of life in the modern world.

The next two essays approach the Song as a text to think with, considering the nature of women’s experiences in affective experience and public life. Fiona Black takes Marc Chagall’s series of paintings on the Song and asks the

experimental question of how it affects the public and political experience of a biblical text when it is “pinked” and framed in a gallery. Black proposes to “think with pink,” which is to consider first the affective experience of feeling and the sensory responses that a color prompts. The somatic alignment of the essay upends the normal interpretive process, and the reader comes to see both the instability of Chagall’s narrative of the Song, and the conducive potential of this biblical text to construct and impact its audiences.

The final essay, by Karen Guth, is titled, “How to Read the Work of ‘Great Artists Who Have Done Terrible Things’: Feminist and Womanist Biblical Scholarship and the #MeToo Debate on Cultural Texts of Terror.” In it, Guth considers how feminist and womanist readings of the Song offer a pathway for thinking critically about an issue very much in contemporary concern: whether and how to continue to engage works that are fraught with the weight of morally compromised authors. Since feminist thinkers such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Renita Weems are explicit about engaging the Bible (with its problematic legacy of patriarchy and even abuse), they can provide a welcome framework for the critical reception of the works of “great artists who have done terrible things.” These feminist and womanist thinkers help to reframe the debate, focusing on 1) challenging androcentric structures of power and authority; 2) enacting paradigm shifts that recognize women as agents, producers of knowledge, and authorities; and 3) reforming historically credentialed industries of production and interpretation.

As these final essays make especially clear—despite their different approaches—reading as and with women builds pathways for the ongoing pursuit of the common goal of justice. The Bible is a profoundly significant cultural text. It often appears in public and is appealed to for all manner of argument about the lives of women—too often in the service of regulating them (see Yvonne Sherwood in this volume). What if the Song itself were given fuller privilege and voice in these conversations? Perhaps this could create new opportunities for a more sensuous, passionate way of engaging the world, informed by what Audre Lorde calls “the power of the erotic.” For Lorde, the erotic is not reducible to sexual energy, but is a multiaxial source of power that is “physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual,” and has the potential to form a bridge between people.⁹ It is our hope that this collection of essays will help create some such bridges, advancing the conversation within biblical studies about and by women, and contributing to the study of the Song and feminist biblical criticism more broadly. While it is by no means exhaustive or comprehensive, this collection gestures to interpretive legacies and

9 Audre Lorde 2007, 56.

possibilities, creating avenues that might yet be pursued. At the same time, there are larger issues at stake. This volume is therefore also an effort to bring attention to the urgency of women's experiences and the issues they face in public. These essays represent the ongoing necessity of intellectual efforts to reengage meaningfully with the feminist project in service to ends that are both academic and political.

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PART 1

*The Song of Songs: Literary and
Theoretical Approaches*



The Song of Songs and #MeToo

Critical Reading, Reparative Reading

Elaine T. James

“It’s just so *extra*,” a student said. Eighteen heads nodded in agreement. “How is this even in the Bible?” The class seemed settled—after reading the Song of Songs, they had decided it had essentially nothing in common with the rest of the Bible, which they largely (understandably) saw as irredeemably patriarchal, basically bad for women. I was teaching at a progressive women’s college, and these students were hardened feminists, well versed in the values of deconstruction and reading with suspicion. Their embrace—their love, even—of the Song of Songs did not come from a place of religious conviction (for most of them; though for some it did) but rather from the sense that as women, the canons of literature and culture had little to say to them until about 1960, give or take. To find a text, especially an ancient one, that seemed to give voice to their experiences *as women* in a credible, non-hostile way, seemed like a kind of gift. “Let’s go outside,” a student suggested, “and read it out loud.” So we did. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,” a woman read with fervor; “Like a lily among the thorns, so is my darling among the young maidens,” another read. The exchange of voices, performing the dialogue among women and non-binary students without a single voice in a masculine register, seemed to linger in the spring air with the heavy scent of lilacs.

Does this report seem rhapsodic? If it is, I won’t apologize. For my students, reading the Song *felt* like a rhapsody, one that allowed them to celebrate feeling like women along with ancient women. This was true not just for one class, but for nearly every class, every semester, for the six years I taught at a women’s college (we didn’t always go outside, of course). For these women, reading the Song was an opportunity to revel, with a sense of cheek, or delight, or religious devotion, in this text’s apparently feminine dimensions, its celebration of sensuality. I offer this anecdote as a starting-point, as a kind of on-the-ground reporting on the experiences of new, young, women and non-binary readers of the Song, most of whom had never heard of the text before, let alone read it. To start an inquiry with the lived experiences of real women is not just a gesture; I take it to be an important methodological move that grows from a desire to see women’s voices taken seriously as the most significant barometers

of their own experiences and well-being. To do so is to “treat their stories with dignity, respect, and care,” to echo the words of Tarana Burke and the ethos of the #MeToo movement.¹

Burke here is speaking specifically about accounts of survivors of sexual violence, which will also become important in engaging the Song, but for the moment we might note that treating stories about women's experiences with dignity, respect, and care is also pertinent with respect to stories of empowerment and delight. Drawing forward and dignifying the positive affective dimensions of women's experiences—reading experiences in particular—provides an important interlocutor for feminist scholarship on the Song. In what follows, I will explore the friction between reading experiences in the current state of feminist research on the Song in light of concerns about sexual violence. I see this as an extension and refinement of previous feminist scholarship on the Song.

First, it is significant to note that biblical scholars reading with a self-consciously feminist perspective starting in the mid-twentieth century sound a lot like my students. In the pioneering scholarship of Phyllis Trible, the Song of Songs has pride of place as a text that offers a deliciously emancipatory potential.²

It is a text characterized by a woman's voice, celebratory of sensual experience, and far from the Bible's narrative fixation on fertility and genealogy, or its legal focus on purity and pollution, here we encounter a dimension of gendered experience that appears to be valued for its own sake. The Song has thus been uniquely seen among biblical texts as a pro- or proto-feminist text. Trible centers the Song in her theological program in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978). She writes:

Love is harmony. Neither male nor female asserts power or possession over the other ... there is no male dominance, no female subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex ... Love for the sake of love is its message.³

In a similar strain, Carol Meyers comments on the gendered logic of the Song's imagery (1986), writes:

¹ <https://metoomvmt.org/stay-informed/press/open-letter-in-defense-of-black-survivors/>. Accessed August 10, 2022.

² Phyllis Trible 1978. For discussion of Trible in the history of feminist reading of the Bible, Jennifer Koosed 2017a, 17–19.

³ Phyllis Trible 1978, 159, 161, 162.

The society depicted in the Bible is portrayed primarily from a male perspective, in terms of male accomplishments and in relation to a God for whom andromorphic imagery predominates. Yet in the Song, such characteristics disappear and in fact the opposite may be true; that is, a gynocentric mode predominates.⁴

Even Julia Kristeva reflects on the Song's status as a primarily liberative (and thus proto-feminist) text. In *Tales of Love* (1987), she writes:

It is she [The Shulammitte] who speaks herself up as equal, in her legal, named, unguilty love, to the other's sovereignty. The amorous Shulammitte is the first woman to be sovereign before her loved one. Through such hymn to the love of the married couple, Judaism asserts itself as a first liberation of women. By virtue of being subjects: loving and speaking ... Without being queen, she is sovereign through her love and the discourse that causes it to be.⁵

This tone has proven remarkably persistent. With similarly celebratory tone, Renita Weems writes (in 1998):

With the Song, women find in the Bible permission to initiate, enjoy, and long for the erotic. The Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships, urging mutuality not domination, interdependence not enmity, sexual fulfillment not mere procreation, uninhibited love not bigoted emotions.⁶

And yet, as some interpreters have pointed out, this is to paint too rosy a picture of the Song. J. Cheryl Exum's memorable piece, "10 Things Every Feminist Should Know About The Song of Songs," serves as a useful survey of issues in the Song that fit uncomfortably with the rhetoric of rhapsody that characterizes both my students and these feminist readings.⁷ Among these "10 Things,"

4 Carol Meyers 1986, 218.

5 Julia Kristeva 1989, 99–100.

6 Renita J. Weems 1998, 168. See also Athalya Brenner 2012, 297. These modern interpreters are not the only readers to admire the Song's feminine dimensions, though its history of interpretation far exceeds the scope of this project.

7 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 30. Exum's long and prolific career has made many significant contributions to scholarship on the Song, including her 2005 book. For a fuller examination of this gendered dimension (imparity) in the Song, see Christopher Meredith 2013; and Yvonne Sophie Thoene 2012.

Exum points out that the text is a poetic creation, and as such, it does not offer a transparent view into any single real woman, or into the lives of historical women in general. At the same time, its poetic facticity means that—based on what we know about authors and scribes in the ancient world—it might well have been the product of a male author. Or, at the least, it may be the product of (and promulgate) male perspectives. On Exum's view, such features should make us skeptical about the text's usefulness as a potential counter-text to the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Significantly, she challenges an oft-touted pro-feminist dimension of the poetry, stating that "there is no gender equality." Instead, she notes, for example, that the young woman appears to be confined indoors, while the young man is free to roam over the hills, reinscribing some traditional dimensions of spatially realized gender difference. An important critique that bears consideration in light of the concerns about sexism and sexual violence noted above, is the following text:

Making their rounds in the city
the sentinels found me;
they beat me, they wounded me,
they took away my mantle,
those sentinels of the walls. (Song 5:7)⁸

Exum cites this passage in her point #6: "*bad things happen to sexually active, forward women.*"⁹ The difficulties of this passage, and how they relate to feminist inquiry, will be the subject of my analysis below.

After the pioneering work of Exum, with a few notable exceptions, not a lot of feminist criticism has been written on the Song. Most intriguing, the text is completely absent from several edited volumes that offer retrospect and prospect of feminist biblical criticism, including two of three volumes of *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, edited by Susanne Scholz. It is absent from *After Exegesis: Feminist Biblical Theology*, edited by Patricia K. Tull and Jacqueline E. Lapsley. It is absent from *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood (except in Ilana Pardes's essay "Toni Morrison's Shulammites: The African-American Song," which does not focus on the Song per se).¹⁰ It does not appear in Deryn Guest's, *Beyond Feminist*

8 All translations are my own.

9 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 30.

10 Susanne Scholz 2013–2018; Patricia K. Tull and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 2015; Yvonne Sherwood, 2017. Sherwood notes that the turn away from "feminine" texts is intentional, a move to "disturb canons," (4); Ilana Pardes 2017; see esp. 133–149; 137, 138–139, 141, 144. But note Cheryl B. Anderson 2016 and Julie Kelso 2012.

Biblical Studies; or Susanne Scholz's, *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible: Feminism, Gender Justice, and the Study of the Old Testament*.¹¹ The fact that the Song has been largely omitted from these larger-scale retrospect/prospect works that can be taken as a barometer of the state of the field is important data. This omission is partly a result of the shift of attention to other important work, including but not limited to: masculinity studies, gender-critical and queer approaches, emphases on race and intersectionality, and a desire to extend the conversation to other parts of the biblical corpus that have been underexplored.¹² As Jennifer Koosed remarks on the state of feminist biblical criticism, attention to female characters and legal codes regarding women "was a necessary step in the feminist transformation of biblical scholarship and religious communities. Yet, now that feminist analysis has succeeded in lifting up women characters, uncovering androcentrism, and critiquing patriarchal legal codes, it is time to return to Moses," that is, the male subject.¹³ There is absolutely much to be gained in feminist inquiry's broadening engagement with other strategies, subjects, and methods. But we might also note a puzzling side effect. Feminist scholarship on the Song has a curious arc, that, to oversimplify a bit, looks like this: first, feminists loved the Song; then, feminists critiqued the Song; then, feminists stopped talking about the Song.¹⁴

That the project of feminism is still ongoing and necessary as a political movement is made abundantly clear by contemporary developments. #MeToo, a phrase first used on social media by Burke in 2006, became the name of the program she founded in Alabama: *#MeToo Movement*. The phrase became a viral social force in 2017 after the New York Times published an article detailing thirty years of accusations of sexual assault against Harvey Weinstein, and Alyssa Milano tweeted to encourage women to come forward and report their stories of abuse. Burke's stated goal in using the phrase was "empowerment

11 Deryn Guest 2012; Susanne Scholz 2017.

12 The Song has received attention from queer hermeneutical perspectives, e.g., Stephen D. Moore 2001; Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore 2003; Christopher King 2015; less so from masculinity studies, with the exception of Martti Nissinen 2019. Intersectional reading strategies are less attested, as Fiona Black (2013) notes: "In general terms, feminist biblical scholars have not engaged with other recent approaches, appearing instead to step out of the way," among these she notes postcolonial theoretical perspectives and readings from the two-thirds world (228). Womanist scholarship has several treatments, e.g. Renita Weems 1998 and her 2004 trade book; Cheryl B. Anderson 2016.

13 Jennifer Koosed 2017b, 230.

14 In J. Cheryl Exum's 2010 "Where Have All the Feminists Gone? Reflections on the Impact of Feminist Biblical Exegesis on the Scholarly Community and Women's Lives," J. Cheryl Exum reflects on the decline of feminist biblical criticism (*lectio difficilior* 2, <http://www.letio.unibe.ch>. Accessed August 10, 2022).

through empathy,” with the belief that women’s lives could be transformed post-trauma through solidarity with other survivors of sexual harassment and sexual violence. #MeToo has burgeoned into a global movement that still promotes the sharing of stories; “Telling our Truths” is a central part of the articulated theory of the movement.¹⁵ Laura Bates’s *Everyday Sexism* project, founded in 2012, began as a website where people could anonymously share their stories of sexism, and has collected over 100,000 testimonies from people across the world, from descriptions of harassment to workplace discrimination, to accounts of violence and rape.¹⁶ Other related movements include #YesAllWomen, which was founded in 2014 by a Muslim woman of color; and #SayHerName, which was founded in 2015 by the African American Policy Forum after the shooting of Sandra Bland, and calls attention to the way in which women of color are subject to police brutality and racial injustice. bell hooks’s classic definition of feminism as “the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression”¹⁷ is still apt because of how it points precisely to the persistence of sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression.¹⁸ hooks and others working toward intersectional feminisms underscore the moral urgency of continuing to acknowledge how sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation are inextricably linked to racism, classism, and the legacies of colonialism.¹⁹ Such movements have galvanized a reassessment of classic “second-wave” feminist concerns around the treatment of the female body—issues like workplace rights and harassment, domestic violence, sexual violence, and rape—with a more critically intersectional paradigm.

In light of such present concerns, then, a feminist reading might return to the Song to reexamine the problem of sexual violence. Because the Song, too, is cognizant of aggression. In what follows, I will engage Exum’s article and the work of Fiona Black, two prominent recent feminist interpreters, both of whom foreground anxiety and violence in the Song in order to critically expose the text’s patriarchal substructure. I will develop their insights by engaging in a discussion of Exum’s point 6, “*bad things happen to sexually active, forward women*,” because it raises issues central to #MeToo and contemporary feminist praxis. I will offer this reading in light of the paradigm of “misogyny” recently put forward by feminist philosopher Kate Manne. Several texts in the Song offer illustrative examples of misogyny in patriarchal contexts as defined in

15 <https://metoomvmt.org/>. Accessed August 10, 2022.

16 <https://everydaysexism.com/>; Accessed 10, 2022. Bates has since published a book in 2016 titled *Everyday Sexism: The Project that Inspired a Worldwide Movement* (St. Martin’s Press).

17 bell hooks 2000, 33.

18 As an example of rising public interest in violence against women, see Snyder 2019.

19 bell hooks 2000, 33; Sara Ahmed 2004b, especially chapter 3, “Woman.”

recent feminist philosophy. Then I will further consider how developing this category of misogyny offers not only explanatory potential, but also a path forward for a nuanced, intersectional feminist reading of the Song that dignifies women's affective poetic experiences.

1 Contemporary Feminist Philosophy and Social Sanction

In her 2018 book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, feminist philosopher Kate Manne examines cases of violence against women in order to distinguish between two distinct phenomena that are often blurred in contemporary discourse. She makes a terminological distinction between “sexism” and “misogyny.” People often talk about “misogyny” as a psychological state—it is an interior disposition of woman-hatred, the way a man feels about a woman or women. This is its dictionary definition. Its use, however, has shifted and this definition can be seen as highly problematic. As Manne notes, following the Isla Vista killings of 2014, in which a twenty-two year-old man killed six people and injured fourteen others, there was a furious online debate about whether his actions should be considered “misogynistic,” in light of the fact that his target was a sorority house.²⁰ Detractors pointed out that he also targeted men, and he loved his mother and sister; so could he technically be considered a “woman-hater”? Such a view Manne calls the “naïve account” of misogyny.

This account of misogyny can be seen in some biblical criticism. Esther Fuchs, for example, defines it in just this way: “Misogyny’ is a psychological phenomenon: it refers to the hatred and fear of women.”²¹ Fuchs cannot be faulted for adhering to the dictionary definition of the term; rather, the use of the term can help clarify the limits of the dictionary definition. Fuchs sees misogyny and “patriarchalism” as closely intertwined, but her approach to biblical narratives accounts for both malignant and positive portrayals of female characters: “misogynistic” narratives portray women as “deceptive or dangerous,” while even positive portrayals of women can serve a narrative that is “patriarchal.”²² Her point that portrayals of “good” women can serve sexist agendas is absolutely on target. But it doesn’t get us out of the problem of speculating about the psychology of individual writers, a classic problem

20 His name is Elliot Rodger, which I deprive from my discussion by keeping it out of the main text.

21 Esther Fuchs 2000, 30.

22 Esther Fuchs 2000, 30.

of romantic, author-centered approaches to literature, which sit uneasily with the expressed reader-oriented approach advocated by Fuchs.²³

Manne's paradigm helps us to step back from speculating about the psychology of individuals—an ultimately conjectural process that gets bogged down in the unknowns of attitudes and individual dispositions—and argues instead that misogyny should be understood in terms of what it *does* to women. She writes:

We should think of misogyny as serving to uphold a patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination (including racisms, xenophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and so on). Misogyny does this by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less circumscribed) class of girls or women to enforce or police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms).²⁴

To make such a distinction is to move away from treating misogyny as what happens to women in a man's mind, to accounting for how misogyny targets women in a man's (patriarchal) world.²⁵ In the case of the Isla-Vista killings, the perpetrator (a self-described "incel," or involuntarily celibate) left a manifesto which expressed a desire for retribution against women for their rejection of him, and against men who were sexually active. He wanted, in other words, to punish women for withholding what they are perceived to owe him. This idea that women are perceived to *owe* something to men is central to Manne's analysis, and refers not only to sexual energy, but can also apply more broadly: their time, attention, love, even seemingly trivial forms of attention like eye contact or a smile. The extreme example of the Isla Vista killings helps illuminate misogyny as the regulatory or policing "arm" of a patriarchal social order. When women step outside of traditionally sanctioned or feminine-coded roles, when they withhold feminine-coded goods, or when they take masculine-coded goods from men, they are susceptible to punishment. Usually "punishment" does not mean murder—it means a host of potential things, ranging from verbal sanction and name-calling, to shaming, to withholding of privileges, to violence. To take the more mundane example of cat-calling, Manne argues

23 Esther Fuchs's approach is explicitly reader-oriented (2000, 17) and yet her paradigm seems to be underwritten by authorial intention.

24 Kate Manne 2018, 13.

25 Kate Manne 2018, 64.

that her hypothesized norm, *she gives feminine-coded goods to him and refrains from taking masculine-coded goods away from him*, explains the dynamics of this kind of everyday misogyny by suggesting the practice be viewed as a male bid for women's attention, which she is held to owe to him (falsely). And, if she does not respond, she might be subject to jeering, insults, profanity, or the threat of physical violence. Such disparate cases as cat-calling and the Isla Vista killings—so different in their scope and scale—still share a moral framework: “The issue is not just the harm they do (which is variable), but also the underlying sense of who owes what to whom, and who may demand it, which they betray and perpetuate.”²⁶

Sexism, in distinction, is what justifies and rationalizes the patriarchal order; it is a system of thought that seeks to defend the asymmetrical power relations that move along lines of gender. So, sexism can be seen in the business of offering defenses for female intellectual or physical inferiority, for example, which by naturalizing sex differences treat them as not only inevitable but beneficial; or by perpetuating cultural stereotypes that make essential features of “feminine” and “masculine” particularly persuasive and digestible, such that they may even become so familiar as to be unnoticeable. Manne describes it in this way: “sexism should be understood primarily as the ‘justificatory’ branch of a patriarchal order, which consists in ideology that has the overall function of *rationalizing* and *justifying* patriarchal social relations.”²⁷ While on the whole, sexism and misogyny work together to maintain a patriarchal social order, they differ in both their aims and their practices. Sexism’s ideological orientation seeks to *justify* gender norms, whereas misogyny’s function is in the policing and *upholding* of gender norms.²⁸

Manne’s “ameliorative, intersectional” account traces what she sees as an “uneven gendered economy of *giving and taking* moral-cum social goods and services.”²⁹ She is careful to note, though, that “both the norms themselves and the mechanisms of enforcement vary widely,” and will necessarily be culturally and positionally contingent: not only should we expect misogyny and sexism to look different among different cultures and times, it will also be expressed differently based on relative forms of disadvantage and the vulnerability of

26 Kate Manne 2018, 115.

27 Kate Manne 2018, 79.

28 Kate Manne 2018, 88. Examples of sexist ideology include arguments against women’s rights to vote based on the assumption of deterministic biological proclivities toward domesticity; or the catholic church’s ongoing exclusion of women from the priesthood because of sexual distinction from Jesus, etc. See Marie-Theres Wacker 1998, 50–51.

29 Kate Manne 2018, 107.

differently situated girls and women.³⁰ She draws on the work of advocates of intersectionality such as Kimberlé W. Crenshaw and Moya Bailey, who develops the concept of “misogynoir” to account for the distinct ways that misogyny intersects with anti-black racism in America. Bailey writes: “What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being *any* woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world.”³¹ Manne guards against universalizing for all women’s experiences while also developing a paradigm that is general enough to have widespread explanatory power. So, the hypothesis will require testing in different cultural contexts—considering it in light of the ancient texts of the Bible can be thought of as one such test case. Manne observes this general principle of patriarchal cultures: that women *tend* to be regarded as owing her capacities to particular other people; these are quintessentially expressed in the categories of relationship (mother, sister, daughter, girlfriend, wife). And they are often construed as relationships of *care*—among the social goods that are traditionally gendered as feminine are the domains of emotional labor and physical nurture. We might note, in a cursory way, that this resonates with the characterization of women in the ancestral narratives in Genesis, or the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel. When women violate cultural expectations and norms, either by refusing to give to him feminine-coded goods such as emotional care, or by taking masculine-coded goods such as career opportunities away from him, they can be subject to “misogyny,” acts of enforcement or even violence that serve to regulate these out-of-gender actions. Again, this paradigm may resonate, for example, with the punishment of Miriam, the treatment of Hagar by Sarah, Vashti’s refusal, and perhaps the symbolic conceptualization of Daughter Zion in the prophets and Lamentations. Manne’s paradigm works surprisingly (alarmingly) well for getting purchase on this unease that some of the Song’s texts evoke for feminist biblical criticism.

2 Back to Exum, and the Song

With Manne’s paradigm in place, then, I return to feminist biblical scholarship on the Song. In “10 Things Every Feminist Should Know,” Exum’s point 6 (“*bad things happen to sexually active, forward women*”) is especially key because it

30 Kate Manne 2018, 13.

31 Moya Bailey, April 27, 2014. See also Moya Bailey, March 14, 2010. For a critical account of misogynoir related to the case of Daniel Holtzclaw, see Kate Manne 2018, 209–219.

centers the concerns about sexual violence that are both so pertinent in the current moment and have also been seen as a if not *the* sticking point for feminist readers of the Song.³² The examples she adduces show the young woman as anxious or compromised in some way, and serve in her view as “recalcitrant details” for a celebratory feminist project; Fiona Black explicitly calls them a “sticking point” for feminist interpretation.³³ I will examine each of Exum’s examples in turn, considering to what extent they are illuminated by the distinction between “misogyny” and “sexism.” Here is her first example:

My mother’s sons were angry with me;
They made me keeper of the vineyards,
But my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song 1:6)

The young woman expresses anxiety about a fraternal relationship in a kin-based viticultural system. Note that she is positioned in a relationship of care, which is central to Manne’s paradigm. She is defined in relationship to brothers, and she is expected to offer some form of labor or nurture for their vineyard (she is its “keeper” or “guard”). It is fair, though, to ask *which* vineyard: there seem to be two, theirs (“they made me keeper of the vineyard”) and hers (“my own vineyard, which is mine, I have not kept,” Song 1:6). Here, as usual, the Song’s lyrical, metaphorical sensibility resists straightforward charting. To Exum’s point, though, we must ask: has anything bad happened to her? In this case, not obviously. She has angered her brothers, and has been gazed at by the sun, both of which might be read as somewhat menacing, especially since male anger can be correlated with violence. I would urge caution, that references to family strife are not identical to descriptions of abuse, though they both may fall on the spectrum of misogyny. Here is her second example:

Catch us the foxes,
The little foxes,
That ruin the vineyards—
For our vineyards are in blossom. (Song 2:15)

How this text serves as an example of Exum’s principle that “bad things happen to sexually active, forward women” is not immediately apparent. Neither does it seem to evidence either misogyny or sexism. It could be extrapolated at the level of symbolism: if we argue that symbolically the vineyard is the

32 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 30.

33 Fiona Black and J. Cheryl Exum 1998, 342. Also Fiona Black 2001.

woman (there is metaphorical precedent in the Song, as in the above-cited verse, 1:6)³⁴ then perhaps it is her body that is (again, symbolically) threatened by the “little foxes,” though of course the accent of the image is on blossoming and flourishing of the shared “vineyard”: “*our* vineyards are in blossom.” It does serve Exum’s point that feminist readings have insufficiently acknowledged that there are hostile dimensions to experience conveyed by the text, a point to which I very much accede.

The next two examples she cites relate to anxiety around the perception of others:

Do not gaze at me because I am dark
because the sun has gazed on me. (Song 1:6)

O that you were like a brother to me,
who nursed at my mother’s breast!
If I met you outside, I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me. (Song 8:1)

Certainly, there is anxiety expressed in each case. In the first, the resistance to the gaze is directed at the otherwise apparently supportive Daughters of Jerusalem, the friends who encourage her pursuit of her lover throughout. There is no sense of punishment for gendered behavior here, so it doesn’t fit our standards for talking about misogyny, and neither is it apparently sexist, ideologically. In the second, the anxiety is more generalized—a theme typical of love poetry ancient and modern: what will people think? Or, why must our love be secret? Nevertheless, the fear that she might be despised should she not conform to social expectations for erotic behavior may be a symptom of fear of patriarchal order and the threat of misogyny; though the threat here is unrealized. The verb here, *yābūzū* (“they will despise”) does suggest social censure—Who is “they”? There’s not a direct antecedent, so the subject is an unidentified collective that takes on a (threatening) moral force with respect to the woman’s desired actions. She imagines a hypothetical or future time when “they” would not despise, which implies that otherwise she is or might become the object of some kind of censure. The same verb is prevalent in the book of Proverbs, which repeatedly insists on behavior that upholds socially sanctioned power relations: “those who despise (*bāz*) the word bring destruction on themselves / but those who respect the commandment will be rewarded” (Proverbs 13:13); “Listen to your father who begot you / and do not

34 On the symbolism of the vineyard, Elaine James 2017a, 27–31.

despise (*wə'al-tābûz*) your mother when she is old" (Proverbs 23:22). In these cases from Proverbs, the moral stance assumed by the speaker is that shame or contempt belongs to the subject who resists or departs from social norms. The Song sharpens this moral force by noting how shame is received by or imposed upon or held as a threat controlling the behavior of the subject (the young woman). As Manne identifies, shame can be one potential mechanism of misogynistic policing and a form of social control.³⁵ Understood in this way, the young woman's wistful desire to openly pursue erotic intimacy *in public* seems to be curbed by a mechanism that is at least potentially linked to misogyny. So far, none of Exum's examples answers unambiguously to her claim that "bad things happen to sexually active, forward women," though they are potentially suggestive of gendered power relations that are aware of the possibility of misogynistic censure, by Manne's definition.

The final example Exum gives does indeed answer to her categorization, that "bad things happen to a sexually active, forward woman." Here is the text:

They found me, the guards going about the city.
They struck me, they wounded me.
They lifted up my garment from me,
those guards of the walls. (Song 5:7)

Much has already been written about this troubling text. The pertinent issue for our consideration is that the young woman pursues her lover and her own erotic fulfillment. In a public space, she "opens," "seeks," and "calls." Apparently as a result, she is met and beaten. It is a fleeting text, and much remains unexplained, and many of our questions go unanswered. Exum writes: "This disturbing encounter, in particular, unsettles both the idyllic picture of romance and the romanticized picture of female autonomy so many readers applaud."³⁶ Black elaborates: "Beating and wounding are ... border crossings, corporeal ones; rape, if it occurred, the more so. Stripping, too, is a violation of boundaries, in a more obvious way perhaps than the beating, for the results might be more physically evident." She goes on to analyze the scene in a way very much in keeping with Manne's categories, concluding: "The woman's acts ... are also transgressive, and this appears to be the reason for her treatment. In return for leaving her house (the 'proper' environ for women in the patriarchal

35 Kate Manne 2018, e.g., 28, 68f, summary statement, 129. On shame as a function of social control in ancient texts, Claudia Camp 1991 and Claudia Camp 2003. For a detailed discussion of shame in prophetic discourse, Johanna Stiebert 2002.

36 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 31.

order), she is ‘reminded’ by the keepers of patriarchy just where she should be at night.”³⁷

By Manne’s terms, the experience might be categorized as an act of misogyny. The social enforcement of patriarchy (note that *haššōmārîm*, “keepers” is both plural and grammatically masculine) responds to the young woman with disciplining behavior: she is stripped, subject to psychological control; and she is beaten, subject to physical control. The scene anticipates the expressed anxiety of 8:1; perhaps it is a realization of what it might look like when *yābūzû* “they despise.” The link between the shame and the psychology of stripping is manifest in other texts of exposure. Specifically, the lifting of skirts is a regular feature of poetic texts that signify the violation of the personified (feminine) city Daughter Zion. Nahum, for example, makes explicit the connection between public exposure and public shame: “I am against you, says Yhwh of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let the nations look on your nakedness / and kingdoms on your shame,” (Nahum 3:5; cp. Jeremiah 13: 22, 26; Lamentations 1:9).³⁸ So, while shame is not mentioned here, it seems to be a pertinent potential dimension of the guards’ abuse. About these guards, Black writes:

The watchmen’s act is ... transgressive. As keepers of order and preventers of violence, they use disorder and violence to repress the actions of the woman. Their treatment of her is unexpected and inappropriate both to the amorous designs of the Song and to the ‘right’ sexual relation that the protagonist seeks with her lover.³⁹

In light of our current public crisis around brutality in policing, we should acknowledge that the expectation of protection *from* the guards is a false assumption. Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName call attention to how identity informs relationships to power and policing; we cannot therefore label the behavior of the guards as “transgressive” without asking “from whose perspective”? The exploitative potential of “keepers of order and preventers of violence,” as Black calls them, is manifest here, regardless of whether they are official or unofficial, part of a system of governance or self-appointed, and we must expect that their power will index differently to people in different

37 Fiona Black 2001, 102.

38 Francis Landy (2011) notes that “the removal of the woman’s clothing at 5.7 is an act of humiliation,” (250).

39 Fiona Black 2001, 102.

social positions. We might challenge the idea that they are “keepers of order and preventers of violence” at all: the Song calls them *haššōmārîm haššōbābîm bā’îr*, which we could translate “the keepers circling the city,” or perhaps “the guards prowling the city” to reflect how the phrase is a sinister echo of other texts of nighttime violation: the same verb *šabab* is used elsewhere for violent military attack (Joshua 6; Judges 16), and gang rape (Genesis 19; Judges 19). Is their reaction to her “unexpected and inappropriate”? It is one thing to express moral outrage over the violent treatment of vulnerable bodies (as Black rightly does); it is another thing to claim that such violent treatment is “unexpected.” As Manne’s proposal helps us to recognize, such violence is in fact exactly what we might expect. The experiences of punishment Manne describes are consonant with what Weems’ womanist analysis has already observed about this passage:

We expect women who traipse through the streets at night, even for good reasons, to encounter danger ... We expect danger. We live with danger as women ... Violence is the penalty for ... woman’s defiance.⁴⁰

It is necessary to the analysis here to recognize that Weems is keyed into the dynamics of misogyny, punishment, and danger in a way that previous feminist readings have not been, and she does not assume that “keepers of order” will act in the woman’s defense: “Violence is the penalty for ... woman’s defiance.” Manne’s paradigm is so useful precisely because it can predict this kind of punishment as a mechanism of misogyny.

We might add to this list another example, one that fits Manne’s category of “misogyny” but does not fit Exum’s category of “bad things happen to sexually active, forward women,” namely: the sense of obligation, the spoken-for-ness of the young woman:

We have a little sister
and she has no breasts.
What shall we do for our sister
on the day when she is spoken for? (Song 8:8)

I have argued elsewhere that the speakers here are plausibly suitors (this fits the context in ways I won’t elaborate here; and the kinship language is

40 Renita Weems 2004, 117, 123.

indicative of lovers throughout the Song).⁴¹ But for our purposes, whether they are suitors or little brothers is almost immaterial. From the perspective of misogyny, we see—articulated from the masculine perspective—that the young woman is spoken-about and spoken-for; that is, women's personhood tends to be held "to be *owed* to others, in the form of service, labor, love, and loyalty."⁴²

3 Moving Forward ...

I have situated this argument in the very specific claims of two important feminist interpreters, Cheryl Exum and Fiona Black. Each of these scholars has applied the hermeneutics of suspicion associated with the feminist critique, "exposing the text." These are important interventions in feminist discourse on the Song, which had been previously relatively uncritical, but rather saw the Song as a respite from the overt sexism of much of the rest of the Bible. Black articulates this in the following way: "The beating scene must leave us unsettled, then, as a constant challenge to the temptations of cohesive reading for the Song of Songs and to its celebrated gynocentrism."⁴³

Black is persuasive: The beating scene, taken seriously, *should* leave us unsettled. Manne's distinctions help us to clarify why: because centering the beating scene does not challenge the Song's gynocentrism. The text is still predominantly in the voice of the woman; it centers on women's camaraderie, their homosociality, on women's experience of eroticism; it is unlike any other text we have in its pronounced gynocentrism, which is what early feminist interpreters were so taken by.⁴⁴ Despite this gynocentrism, the Song does reflect its patriarchal (and heteronormative) context. And in that patriarchal context, we might expect to see mechanisms of misogyny in operation. What would be unexpected, in light of Manne's model, would be to see this powerfully erotic gynocentrism proceed without activating mechanisms of misogyny. By reorienting misogyny from a psychological category to an experiential one, we are able to clarify the presence of a troubling text like Song 5:7 from a feminist perspective. But this does not mean that the ideology of the Song itself need necessarily be construed as sexist.

⁴¹ Elaine James 2017b.

⁴² Kate Manne 2018, 173.

⁴³ Fiona Black 2001, 104; cf. her discussion of reading "*dissidently*," Fiona Black 2013, 228.

⁴⁴ Marie-Theres Wacker 1998, 50.

As is no doubt obvious at this point, my concerns are both political and hermeneutical. Manne's work offers terminological clarity that helps to explain the conundrum of how a text so celebratory of female eroticism also witnesses to and encodes gendered forms of domination.⁴⁵ This application of the term "misogyny" to the act of violence experienced by the young woman is straightforward enough. But my hope is also to make a subtler hermeneutic point. As Black points out, there is no consensus, but instead considerable debate, on the Song's moral status with respect to feminist inquiry. Let me be clear in saying: I am not suggesting that there should be one consensus view on the matter. But one good reason to re-center the Song is that the text does not let the male voice "seize control of the narrative," as Manne puts it; though of course male voices in the history of interpretation will seize control of the narrative *about* the text.

In "10 Things Every Feminist Should Know About the Song of Songs," Exum archly and with characteristic incisiveness writes: "*this text can be hazardous to your critical faculties*. Something about the Song turns even the most hardened of feminist critics into a bubbling romantic."⁴⁶ Oddly enough, Exum's humorous language has the (no doubt unintended) effect of policing in gendered terms: feminists should be "hardened," not "bubbling" or "romantic." Exum here collapses feminist concerns entirely into a hermeneutics of suspicion, prizing critical exposure as the only credible outcome of a feminist project. Exum's method is as important as it is recognizable: it is a hallmark of feminist criticism to seek to expose the ideologies of patriarchy in canonical cultural texts, and the project remains necessary. The reader will note that I myself used the term "hardened" above to describe to my well-trained women's college students, for their readiness to suspect that any given text might be *sexist*, contributing to the ideologies of patriarchy. Here is where Manne's distinction between sexism and misogyny has especial payoff for thinking about texts. Does a text support or naturalize patriarchal ideologies? Does it serve as a barrier to the girls and women who encounter it? If it does serve as a barrier (and we therefore deem it "sexist,") does it do so in ways that are persistent and problematic, or does it do so in ways that are so obviously, egregiously outdated that they are treated as nonsense, as artifacts rather than as texts with cultural force? Manne's sexism/misogyny distinction also opens the door to other configurations besides the sexist and misogynistic, on the one hand, or pro- or proto-feminist, on the other. For example, a text might be non-sexist but still witness to misogynistic

45 For an alternative account (via Luce Irigaray), with similar concerns and related conclusions, see Julie Kelso 2012, esp. 174.

46 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 25. Italics original.

experiences (as I am suggesting might be the case for the Song); a text might be sexist (in obvious or in subtle ways) but nevertheless non-misogynistic. And Manne rightly notes that misogyny is not an exclusively male prerogative; it is just as possible that women (and pro-feminist men) who do not adhere to sexist ideologies can nevertheless act in censoring or disciplining ways that enforce gendered norms and expectations, either wittingly, or unwittingly. This also encourages us to be curious about how women *within* the Song and women readers *of* the Song embody stances toward the text and toward other readers that are variably related to discourses of power as they index different somatic realities. Asking such questions brings us into a subtle and messy conversation that will depend deeply on the contexts, backgrounds, and experiences of the particular audiences who encounter the text. To acknowledge this is to bring us into the world of affect, which is the world in which my students and that first generation of feminist biblical scholars live—where there is a sense of physical movement, impact, and response to aesthetic dimensions of the text that somehow manages to operate alongside or even against the sensibilities of feminist hermeneutics.

I have in mind here the work of a number of theorists of affect, who seek to explore precisely those ways in which experiences, including experiences of reading, are bodily and extra-semantic. Sarah Ahmed, for example, describes how “to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn toward things. A phenomenology of happiness might explore how we attend to those things we find delightful.”⁴⁷ Taking the affective experiences of readers seriously, and highlighting the experiences of my students and of earlier feminist readers is in some sense a work of “feminist memory,” to use another phrase from Ahmed: It insists on remembering the story of women’s authorization and critical authority as part of the project of feminism and of the very practical tasks of changing the realities of a patriarchal world, and a patriarchal scholarly guild.⁴⁸

Even more to the heart of my concern here is Eve Sedgwick’s 2003 essay “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.”⁴⁹ Sedgwick’s elegant critique of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” is that it may have an unforeseen, homogenizing effect, limiting the ability of critics to probe variable, local dimensions of texts and their bearing on the contingencies of readerly knowledge. She writes: “it seems to

47 Sara Ahmed 2006, 23. For an intellectual history of affect theory in the field of biblical studies, see Maia Kotrosits 2016.

48 Sara Ahmed 2017, 15.

49 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003.

me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds.”⁵⁰ In the call for a range of feminist readings, and while remaining inclusive of the dispositionally critical, Sedgwick proposes “reparative reading,” or readings that seek wholeness and even solace from texts. She notes, drawing on psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s work on the paranoid and the reparative, that “one of Klein’s names for the reparative process is love.”⁵¹ There are cues here that might be taken from Sedgwick’s queer approach to texts, which, like much work in queer interpretation, tends to be expansive and playful, not solely critical. As Rhiannon Graybill suggests, queer theory in this way “has the potential to serve as a powerful feminist method.”⁵² Love, pleasure, and solace are thematically significant dimensions of readerly experience that characterize queer approaches to texts, and affective ones. To take another example from within the field of biblical studies, Erin Runions notes that “For many people (women, LGBT folks, and minority populations), biblical texts circulate in toxic, traumatic, and limiting ways. Yet even then the text can still be taken up for solace. As much as the biblical texts are read for justification of political ideologies and actions, they are read by many for comfort and healing.”⁵³

For my students reading the Song of Songs, and for an earlier generation of feminist biblical critics, the text’s central affective potential is not in the scene of abuse; it is, rather, in the scope of the text’s overwhelming positivity about feminine sexuality, *despite the scene of abuse*. That my students delight in the embodied experience of reading the Song of Songs out loud and take pleasure in reading it against the grain of its heteronormativity; that they experience it as a reprieve from the sexism and androcentrism of other biblical texts; that they find in it opportunities for comfort and for healing; that they *love* the Song of Songs, is no small thing. Such responses are part of the broad and variable affective potential of the text. A reparative feminist reading strategy might center the Song, and it might even center the beating scene of Song 5:7. But, with Manne’s explication of misogyny, it might refuse to hold up that scene triumphantly in order to expose it as the tell of a sexist ideology. Instead, it might note that when women and women’s lives are taken seriously, sexual violence is going to be part of the drama, not because the texts are promoting sexist ideologies (though they may) but because this is symptomatic of

50 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 126.

51 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 128.

52 Rhiannon Graybill 2016, 305.

53 Erin Runions 2019, 175.

women's experiences.⁵⁴ It might also ask how a text that stands as a witness to women's vulnerability to punishment might be a source of solidarity for readers—especially women—seeking solace in what is still a violently patriarchal world.

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54 As Emily Nussbaum argues, an uptick in female characters and women-centered plots in TV shows has a direct relationship to increased depictions of sexual violence and violation. She writes, "When women's lives are taken seriously, sexual violence is going to be part of the drama," which I echo here (Emily Nussbaum 2019, 217).

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Sex in Public in the Song of Songs

Rhiannon Graybill

But where is the tweaking, thwacking, thumping, sliming, and rubbing you might have expected—or dreaded—in a paper on sex?



The Song of Songs is frequently celebrated as a great love poem. Even more than *love*, the Song is a poem filled with *sex*: sexual desire, sexualized descriptions, sexual acts, sex itself.¹ The metaphors that weave through the poem—the body as a garden, the abundance of luscious fruits, smells and tastes that overwhelm the senses—wrap its descriptions in sensual pleasures, making sex into something both aesthetic and erotic. But this is not the only way that sex is represented in the Song. Instead, sex is equally messy, disruptive, unsettling, “unlovely,” or even “grotesque.”² Or in the words I have borrowed for my title, sex in the Song is filled with “the tweaking, thwacking, thumping, sliming, and rubbing you might have expected—or dreaded—in a [poem about] sex.”

But this description, however fitting it may be, was not written to describe the Song of Songs. It comes, instead, from queer theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s now-classic 1998 article “Sex in Public.”³ Berlant and Warner’s focus was not *public sex* (that is, the performance of sex in public places),⁴ but rather “sex as it is mediated by publics.”⁵ All sex, according to Berlant and Warner, is “in public” insofar as sex is *always* mediated; this mediation, moreover, serves political and ideological functions. While much of the article is concerned with how sex is regulated and subjected to disciplinary control,

1 This point has been made by multiple scholars. Ilana Pardes (1992) offers a nuanced reading that emphasizes both sexual desire and its frustrations in the text; see 118–43. A more aggressively sexual formulation is offered by Roland Boer. See Roland Boer 2000, 276–301 and Roland Boer 2012, 27–34.

2 For these final two descriptors, see Christopher Meredith 2018; Fiona Black 2000 and 2009.

3 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998.

4 On this topic, see Ken Stone 2004, 68–90.

5 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 547.

“Sex in Public” also explores the possibility of “queer worldmaking” through alternative sex publics and sexual cultures. Berlant and Warner express their aim as “describ[ing] what we want to promote as the radical aspirations of queer culture building; not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.”⁶ Such queer world-making is the work of queer counterpublics and counterpublic spaces.

In invoking *queer* counterpublics and *queerness* more generally, I am situating my reading in a larger world of queer interpretation and queer theory. The term *queer* is frequently contested, in biblical studies and outside of it.⁷ *Queer* can be used as an identity category; it can describe practices and organizations of power that are non-heterosexual or that challenge “compulsory heterosexuality” (Monique Wittig’s term); it can summon forth an oppositional, subversive, or playfully perverse relationship to texts, bodies, and persons—the act of interpretation as *queering*. As Berlant and Warner note in another essay, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” (1995), *queer* lacks “a stable referential content and pragmatic force.”⁸ But rather than address this absence, Berlant and Warner emphasize the spaces of possibility that inhere in *queer*, and in queer interpretation. They propose that

queer commentary has been animated by a sense of belonging to a dis-course world that only partly exists yet. This work aspires to create publics, publics that can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways; publics that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle; publics whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, hoped for.⁹

This emphasis on queer interpretation as a way of *creating space*—spaces for sex, love, memory, hope, intimacy, and grief—animates my queer explorations of the Song as well.

In both of the essays invoked here, Berlant and Warner are concerned with the present, or more specifically, with *their* present at the moment of writing (the 1990s). Subsequent work in queer theory has built on their analysis to consider how queer counterpublics and counterspaces might take shape in our

6 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 548.

7 See the discussions in Ken Stone 2013; Rhiannon Graybill 2016.

8 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1995, 344.

9 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1995, 344.

own unfolding present. Bringing together this analysis with the biblical text, I will suggest that we find such queer counterpublics and queer counterspaces in the Song of Songs. Nor is the queer limited to marginal traces in the Song: instead, the Song of Songs is organized by and around the concept of “sex in public.” The public nature of the sex in the Song—from specific sex acts to abstract discursive and disciplinary regimes—opens onto “queer counterpublics,” which present an alternative to its regulatory structures and which *queer* sex, speech, and representation, all at once.

This is not simply an intriguing parallel. Instead, reading for “sex in public” makes the Song of Songs available for queer counter-readings that serve the larger project of a feminist exploration of the voice.¹⁰ This inquiry is relevant to the subject of women’s public voices and the Song of Songs, as well as the larger political and ethical questions onto which this topic opens. In the Song, we find not just women’s voices (the Shulammite, the daughters of Jerusalem) but also the construction of a public sexual culture, the harsh regulation of nonnormative sex, and the tentative construction of counterpublics, both in women’s speech and women’s spaces. Reading the biblical text with Berlant and Warner’s essay connects the ancient texts to modern questions while offering a way to challenge normativity and explore alternative sexual, verbal, and oral cultures. In turn, connecting the Song to “Sex in Public” responds to contemporary debates over sex, gender, voices, and power without slipping into sex phobia or the false universalism of certain strands of Second Wave feminism. Public sex is a form of public speech. The Song offers both disciplinary public sexual cultures and the possibility of queer countercultures that speak differently of, and to, sex and power.

1 Public Sexual Cultures

Berlant and Warner published “Sex in Public” (the iconic title has no subtitle) in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1998. The piece is now widely recognized as both a classic of queer criticism and a clear product of its time. AIDS, bath-house culture, and the welfare and tax reforms of the Clinton era all inform the argument. The national sexual culture that Berlant and Warner describe is still securely heterosexual; Pride is not yet a family event, and Campbell’s soup and J.C. Penney do not yet proudly feature same-sex parents in their

10 Of course, this is not the only queer mode of reading available for interpreting the Song. For other queer readings, see *inter alia* Christopher King 2000; Christopher King 2006; Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore 2003.

ads.¹¹ “Homonormativity” is dismissed as impossible; “homonationalism” does not yet have a name (or seemingly much of a practice).¹² But the more things change, the more they stay the same: the critique of normativity, which is the central thrust of the article, remains a central tenet of queer theory, and of much of radical politics.¹³ Furthermore, the essay’s descriptions of publics and counterpublics, its analysis of the production of national (or dominant) sexual cultures, and its insistence that “sex opens a wedge to the transformation of ... social norms” all mark its ongoing relevance.¹⁴

“Sex in Public” tracks the sexual culture of “national heterosexuality” and the way that this figure is sustained through appeals to intimacy. Asserting that “heterosexual culture achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy,” Berlant and Warner identify four key strategies that heterosexual culture in the United States uses to maintain dominance:

First, its conventional spaces presuppose a structural differentiation of “personal life” from work, politics, and the public sphere. Second, the normativity of heterosexual culture links intimacy only to the institutions of personal life, making them the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development. Third, by making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures. Finally, those conventions conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict.¹⁵

As Berlant and Warner detail, the dominant sexual culture seeks to separate the personal from the public. It acts as if intimacy is exclusively personal (and not public), while blocking the formation of alternative or sexually explicit sexual cultures. And it promotes a fantasy of a prepolitical realm. These strategies have powerful and tangible consequences. Under this dominant culture, “intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse, a

11 Mathew Rodriguez, October 9, 2015; Katie Stroh, January 21, 2013.

12 For the dismissal of homonormativity, see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 548n. On homonationalism, Jasbir K. Puar, 2007.

13 For a critique of this position, and of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s essay’s role in it, see Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, 2015.

14 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 565.

15 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 553.

promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives, consoles them for the damaged humanity of mass society, and shames them for any divergence between their lives and the intimate sphere that is alleged to be simple personhood.”¹⁶

This description of the dominant sexual cultures of the late 1990s United States is accompanied by examples. The essay opens with two: a 1993 cover from *Time* magazine and a 1995 zoning law from New York City. The *Time* cover shows a smiling woman, heralded by the headline as “The New Face of America”; the inset text urges us to “take a good look at this woman,” adding with pride that “she was created by a computer mix of several races.” The woman’s skin is a warm tan; her eyes are greenish-brown; her dark brown hair is pulled back. Her neck and shoulders are bare, suggesting she may be nude.¹⁷ As Berlant and Warner draw out, this image at once both assumes and elides heterosexuality as a national sexual culture. The “interracial reproductive sex” required to produce the “new face of America” is represented as personal and pre-political—sex is a private matter—even as it provides the building blocks for a national fantasy of citizenship modeled on the metaphor of the family.¹⁸ Their second example is a 1995 New York City zoning law regulating the location of adult businesses, including adult theaters, sex shops, and sex clubs.¹⁹ Significantly, the new zoning laws disproportionately affected gay men, such as the patrons of adult movies theaters and sex shops on Christopher Street, though also heterosexual kink and public sex enthusiasts, and others interested in nonnormative sex. In this example, sex clubs and adult theaters are regulated and banned as a way of insisting on the distinction between public space (for example, commercial real estate) and private acts (sex). As with the magazine cover, the law’s goal is to uphold the national heterosexual culture and its sustaining fantasy of intimacy.

Both the examples and the analysis that introduce “Sex in Public” are contextually grounded and historically specific. But there are also provocative resonances with the Song of Songs, and with the biblical poem’s own construction of public sexual cultures, as well as its uses of intimacy. Following Berlant and Warner’s lead, I turn to two framing examples: the representation of the

16 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 553.

17 The cover is widely available online, including at <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html>, accessed July 19, 2022. Interestingly, a subheadline below “The New Face of America” reads “How Immigrants Are Shaping the World’s First Multicultural Society.”

18 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 549.

19 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 548–52.

woman across the Song and the punishment of sexual deviance in chapters 3 and 5.

2 The Woman

The Song of Songs is a collection of love poems, alternating between a male and a female speaker. They mostly address their words to each other, though occasionally others enter into the conversation, including the “daughters of Jerusalem,” discussed further below. The female speaker is often referred to as the “Shulammite,” based on a single verse, Song 7:1 [6:13 Eng.], where the woman is both addressed and referred to with this term. The man has no such name or identifier. The question of whether the text presents two relatively stable characters or offers, instead, a loose anthology of voices, is much debated in biblical scholarship. Is the Shulammite a single woman or a composite fiction? Do we have one pair of lovers, or many? These are important questions in reading the Song of Songs, but they do not really alter the reading I offer here, insofar as I am interested in sex as a mode of speech mediated by publics, rather than in the specific identity of the speaker. Following J. Cheryl Exum, I will speak of “the woman” as a single character for convenience, while also acknowledging these larger questions persist.²⁰

What, then of this woman? From the Song’s very beginning, both her body and her sexuality are made part of a sexual public. Following an introductory verse in Song 1:1, the woman is the first to speak; she does so with frank enthusiasm:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
 for your love is better than wine.
 Your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out,
 therefore all the young women love you.
 Draw me after you, let’s hurry! The king has brought me to his chambers.
 We will rejoice and celebrate you, we will praise your love more than
 wine, rightly do they love you. (Song 1:2–4)²¹

Her words create a scene of eroticism and intimacy: kisses and fluids and love, all mingled delightfully together. But it is also from the beginning a *public*

20 On this point, see J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 26n13. I do the same for the lover. Note that in chapter 3 of this volume, Simeon Chavel argues for treating the book as voiced by a single character.

21 Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.

scene. The love of the “young women” is invoked as a qualifying precondition for the passion described in the text. The “king” also appears in verse 4, rather unsubtly suggesting the presence of state power, even in this moment of purportedly private passion. The switch from “I” to “we” in verse 4 likewise signals the public nature of the woman’s speech. Her words, seemingly an expression of personal intimacy, spill over—within a single verse—into community speech. Even “love” and desire become collective acts and properties; thus “rightly do they love you” (spoken by the daughters of Jerusalem, who form the woman’s community).

The public production and regulation of sex continues as the speech proceeds. The Shulammite continues,

I am black and beautiful, O Daughters of Jerusalem,
Like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.
Don’t look at me because I am black, because the sun has gazed at me.
My mother’s sons were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the
vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept! (Song 1:5–6)

The reference to the woman’s blackness has become an important passage for womanist biblical interpretation.²² It is especially significant as a rejoinder to “misogynoir,” or the pernicious combination of racism, sexism, and colorism faced by Black women.²³ The woman’s reference to her skin color is also significant in relation to the questions of race and futurity that surface in Berlant and Warner’s discussion of the “The New Face of America” magazine cover, which imagines an America in which “racial difference itself will be finally replaced by a kind of family feeling based on blood.”²⁴ That this assumed future of “family feeling” is both racialized and racist goes without saying. Returning to the Song, it is likewise notable that the woman’s reference to her blackness is immediately followed by its public regulation. Here, the woman’s brothers—“my mother’s sons”—take on the role of regulating the sexuality of the woman and the access to her body.²⁵ Significantly, they fault their sister for *making sex public*. This is figured by both terms of the metaphor: the sister draws their anger both for going outside (into the sun, out of the tent, into public space) and for making her own “sex” public (“my vineyard I have not kept.”).

22 See, among recent work, Laress Wilkins Lawrence 2017; Keri Day 2018.

23 Nyasha Junior, among others, has raised the issue of misogynoir vis-à-vis the Song; see Nyasha Junior, June 3–5, 2019.

24 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 549.

25 “My mother’s sons” may suggest full or “uterine” siblings; see Cynthia R. Chapman 2016. On the significance of the mother’s body to the regulation of sex, see further below.

Interestingly, the male lover uses similar terms to describe the woman's body and the appropriate limitations of sex to intimacy: thus "a garden locked is my sister, my bride" (Song 4:12)—the body is not just a garden, but a private garden. Similar language of privacy and intimacy, along with repeated metaphorical references to the regulatory apparatus of political power (via references to kings, towers, shields, etc., often dismissed as "just" metaphor) sustain this regulatory structure. It is only when sex or its signifiers are made non-private that they attract punishment; this punishment is not so much for the sex itself as for revealing the fantasy of intimacy as a fantasy. There is no escaping the publicness of sex, no retreat into a purely private or personal realm. Sometimes, this act of making sex public appears unintentional, as in the case of the "little sister's" breasts that so disturb the brothers in Song 8:8. Other times, the offense is more explicit, and thus considered deserving of censure. This leads to my second example, the punishment of sexual deviance in the two nocturnal fantasy sequences in chapters 3 and 5.

3 Punishing Sexual Deviance

The second example of sex in public I will consider here involves the punishment of sexual deviance. There are two scenes in the Song in which "sex in public" doubles as "public sex," 3:1–4 and 5:6–7. Both scenes take place at night; both center on the figure of the Shulammitte. The first scene begins in bed but quickly moves from it:

In my bed in the night, I sought the one that I love
 I sought him but did not find him.²⁶
 I will get up and go around the city, I will seek the one I love in the streets
 and the squares;
 I sought him but did not find him.
 The watchmen going around the city found me—
 Have you seen the one that I love? (3:1–3)

The woman's desire drives her to go out into the city and seek her lover. While her motivations are not fully clear, sexual desire seems to play at least a part in the scene (an impression reinforced by the parallel episode in 5:2–8, discussed below, as well as by the general emphasis of the Song). That the woman's

26 Reading with MT; LXX adds "I called him but he did not answer me"; ἐκάλεσα αὐτόν, καὶ οὐχ ὑπήκουσέν μου.

actions are socially nonnormative and even deviant is signaled by her encounter with the guards.²⁷

This encounter is without negative consequence, and the woman's nocturnal sojourn in chapter 3 ends happily—"Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves." Not so in chapter 5, when the woman again ventures out but this time encounters violence. The second scene repeats and amplifies the dynamics of the first. It begins, as in chapter 3, at night:

I was sleeping, but my heart was awake—
 the sound of my beloved knocking! Open for me, my sister, my love,
 my dove, my perfect one;
 my head is wet with dew, my hair with the drops of the night.
 I had stripped off my clothes, how could I get dressed?
 I had washed my feet, how could I dirty them?
 My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,
 my heart moaned for him. (5:2–4)

There is clearly something sexual here, though *what*, precisely, is not clear—a scene of masturbation? a mutual sexual encounter? a fantasy? a dream? Whatever it is, it leads the Shulammite to venture outside again:

I rose up to open to my beloved,
 my hands dripped with myrrh,
 and my fingers with liquid myrrh upon the handle of the bolt.
 I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone.
 I faltered when he spoke.
 I sought him but did not find him; I called but he did not answer.
 The watchmen going around the city found me, they beat me, they
 injured me,
 They took away my mantle, the watchmen of the walls. (5:6–7)

Unlike the prior scene, this episode does not end with the woman finding her lover; instead, she instructs the Daughters of Jerusalem, "if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am sick from love" (5:8).

This scene has been read many ways; in the context of voices and publics, Sarah Zhang has suggested it can be understood as a lesson in gaining

27 Fiona Black (2001, 99), in contrast, reads the first scene as dream or flight of fantasy, and the second as actual encounter.

interpretive competency.²⁸ Ilana Pades emphasizes “the tension between desire and fulfillment,” reading the watchmen as a figure of repression.²⁹ Other readers, including Black, J. Cheryl Exum, and Elaine T. James, suggest the scene entails punishment for sexual assertiveness.³⁰ Building on these readings, I will suggest Song 5:1–8 envisions the punishment of deviant sexuality. This deviance, moreover, is rooted in its *public-ness*. The Shulammite is not punished until she brings sex into public. That she is beaten by the sentinels is, in this reading, not a pleasurable masochistic fantasy,³¹ as it is an instantiation of state violence. The same applies to the stripping of her mantle; thus Carole R. Fontaine writes, “Having one’s outer wrapper forcibly stripped ... is no little matter of dress or manners; it is a stunning humiliation designed to evoke terror and fear.”³² The scene thus presents multiple forms of state-sanctioned brutality against the female body. The woman is punished not simply for being female, but for actively seeking sex, and for doing so alone, at night, and in a public place: out in the city, rather than in the private intimacy of home. As James draws out, the focus on walls and watchmen (note that in chapter 3, the woman merely encounters watchmen; here, they are “the watchmen of the walls”) emphasizes surveillance and control.³³ She elaborates this argument in her more recent work on the Song, noting that “in light of our current public crisis around brutality in policing, we should acknowledge that the expectation of protection *from* the guards is a false assumption.”³⁴ James’ argument represents a timely updating of Exum’s assessment of the scene: “*bad things happen to sexually active, forward women*.”³⁵ That the Shulammite is described as “black” (1:5) racializes the violence against her; read in our contemporary moment, it resonates as well with current discourses of racialized state and police brutality.

Building on these analyses, as well as the well-established body of feminist work on the intersectionality of gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality, I will also suggest that the woman’s beating represents a punishment of *queer sex*. This becomes clear when we consider the ways that her nocturnal erotic pursuit

28 Sarah Zhang, June 3–5, 2019. See as well Zhang’s essay in chapter 4 of this volume.

29 Ilana Pades 1992, 132, 137.

30 Fiona Black 2001, 101–102; J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 30; Elaine James 2017a, 100.

31 As is argued, for example, in Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore 2003, 48. For a discussion and critical assessment of the masochism reading, see Julie Kelso 2012.

32 Carol R. Fontaine 2004, 117; cf. Fiona Black 2001, 101–102.

33 Elaine James 2017a, 100.

34 See the essay by Elaine James in chapter 1 of this volume. James further links the scene to Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName.

35 J. Cheryl Exum 2000, 30, italics original.

goes against norms of gender, space, and time (of day). Here I follow a familiar line of argument in queer theory that defines queer as opposed to norms. A classic articulation comes from David Halperin:

“Queer” ... acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. “Queer,” then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but ... available to anyone ... marginalized because of her or his sexual practices.³⁶

The woman's actions place her in such a “positionality vis-à-vis the normative,” even as the beating she receives gives physical form to her marginalization and deviance in the eyes of the state. The connection to contemporary conversations about racialized violence and state brutality becomes clearer still when we consider that the woman is black (as she declares in chapter 1). I am interested by the failure of commentators here to see the woman's beating as *actual violence*. Reading it as fantasy or wish fulfillment, as, for example, Virginia Burrus and Stephen Moore do, is perhaps an alternative to confronting a more distressing textual reality, though one that also takes seriously the risks that attend queer eroticism and queer counterpublics.³⁷

Thus while the Song presents sex as bound up with intimacy, it also reveals that this is in fact a fantasy: the fantasy of the pre-political. There is no escaping from public sex, because sex prior to or “outside” the political realm does not exist. This is not just true of the Song, but of every book of the Bible (and of the world outside the Bible as well). In exhibiting a public sexual culture, the Song is not unique. What *is* distinctive, however, is the way that the Song shows us that the fantasy is in fact a fantasy: it exposes ideology in action. But that is not all: in addition to the dominant public sexual culture, the Song also offers glimpses of an alternative space, a space for changes: the *counterpublic*.

36 David M. Halperin 1995, 62, italics original. Many commentators note that the Shulammitte's actions here violate norms, without, however, connecting this to the queer.

37 Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore 2003, 48.

4 Counterpublics and Queer Worldmaking

As part of their critique of normativity, Berlant and Warner raise the possibility of deploying new forms of sex in public as part of a practice of queer worldmaking. This idea centers on queer culture and queer community. Queer worldmaking, which is the work of these groups and forces, changes the ways in which futures are imagined and produced. They write,

By queer culture we mean a world-making project, where “world,” like “public,” differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.³⁸

In the more than two decades since the publication of “Sex in Public,” queer worldmaking has become a major focus of both queer theory and queer practice. Performance, fashion, dance, music, games, children’s literature, and political protest have all been analyzed as practices of queer worldmaking; there are, of course, a host of other examples.³⁹ Queer worldmaking is even the subject of its own journal, *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, which foregrounds “an emphasis on worldmaking praxis.”⁴⁰ One place where such worldmaking begins is with sex in public. Just as sex in public is regulated and controlled, sustaining, for example, a national culture of heterosexuality, so too can alternate forms of sex in public produce alternate worlds and ways of being.

We find preliminary explorations of such worldmaking praxis described in Berlant and Warner’s article. More than a diagnosis of the current condition, “Sex in Public” closes with two additional scenes of public sex that represent such possibilities: a conversation about sex toys with a straight couple (who raise the topic while in a cab with Berlant and Warner), and a performance of

³⁸ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 558.

³⁹ On performance: Ramón Rivera-Servera 2012. On fashion: Eric Darnell Pritchard 2017; Fiona Buckland 2002. On music: Jodie Taylor 2012. On games: Bonnie Ruberg 2015; Jeffrey Sens 2015. On children’s literature: Angel Daniel Matos 2018. On political protest: Benjamin Shepard 2009. The examples cited here are intended as a sampling and are not exhaustive.

⁴⁰ The journal also explicitly links the term to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, noting, “Our appropriation of it is dedicatory and aspirational.” *QED* is published by Michigan State University Press. See further <https://msupress.org/journals/qed/>, accessed July 19, 2022.

“erotic vomiting” in a gay club. These represent nascent queer worlds that draw on and produce new counterpublics. Significantly, these new counterpublics are outside the traditional understanding of intimacy: they are, instead, promiscuous, public, and political. Like poststructuralism, queer worldmaking suggests that the world is *made*. And since it is made, other forms of making are possible. Such acts of worldmaking occur among, or even create their own, *counterpublics*. And in the process of queer worldmaking, “sex opens a wedge to the transformation of those social norms that require only its static intelligibility or its deadness as a source of meaning.”⁴¹

As in the cab and the club, so too in the Song. Let us turn to the possibilities of queer counterpublics and queer worldmaking within the biblical text, offering up three examples: the daughters of Jerusalem, the house of the mother, and the queer possibility of the grotesque.

5 The Daughters of Jerusalem

In addition to the Shulammitte and her male lover, the Song contains a third (collective) character: the “daughters of Jerusalem.” The daughters are invoked by the Shulammitte as interlocutors at multiple points in the text, including 2:7, 3:5, 3:10, 5:8, 5:16, and 8:4. Typical is 5:8, when the Shulammitte declares, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am sick from love.”

The role of the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song is both widely recognized and, I would suggest, under-theorized, at least in relation to the production of public sex in the text.⁴² They are often treated as a kind of Greek chorus for the Shulammitte’s breathless reflections on love.⁴³ The Shulammitte’s declarations to the daughters are sometimes read as amplifying her desires; other readers suggest that they function to check her actions.⁴⁴ In either case, the central concern is still the woman’s sexual relationship with the male lover. And yet as Tod Linafelt points out, the “arithmetic of eros” is not limited to dyads. Instead, the presence of a third introduces complexity and ratchets up

41 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 563.

42 On the daughters more generally, see Phyllis Trible 1978, 145–152; Tod Linafelt 2005; Yael Klangwisan 2014, 67–74.

43 E.g. Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1998, 6; Andre LaCocque 2006, 42, especially n96; F. Scott Spencer 2017, xlv, 44, 100.

44 Carol Meyers suggests that the daughters “play a strong supporting role in the ebb and flow of emotions.” Carol Meyers 1986, 218.

desire.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the observational and interlocutory role of the daughters of Jerusalem does not imply that they are somehow secondary to either poetry or eros. To the contrary: “even though they are not part of the erotic relationship per se—that is, the triangle is no *ménage à trois*—the poetry relies on the third point to articulate its vision of eros.”⁴⁶ As with love, so too with sex: the conversational space opened by the Shulammitte’s speeches to the daughters of Jerusalem also function as a form of sex in public.

Significantly, discourse is one way in which sex in public is produced and negotiated. The “sex public” is where sex is articulated and worked out. And queer counterpublics often begin as discourse about sex. To this point, consider another of Berlant and Warner’s key examples: the straight couple who use the occasion of a shared cab ride with our authors to raise the question of sex toys with their queer friends. Berlant and Warner are less interested in the queerness of vibrators (though they make note of “nonreproductive eroticism” and disorganized bodies and pleasures in passing),⁴⁷ than in the way that this queer counterpleasure requires an audience, or perhaps a witness:

They said to us: you’re the only people we can talk to about this; to all of our straight friends this would make us perverts. In order not to feel like perverts, they had to make us into a kind of sex public.⁴⁸

This is, indeed, one function of the Shulammitte’s repeated asides addressed to the daughters, which continue even in the face of the daughters’ silence. And like Berlant and Warner, they do not respond—or their response is not necessary for the utterances to do their work of constructing an alternative “sex public,” even without the full consent of those implicated in it. (*We’re just trying to catch a ride!* you can imagine Berlant and Warner, in a less exemplary moment of queer theorist-ness, exclaiming in exasperation.)

This is reflected, as well, when we look more closely at the Shulammitte’s words. Four of her addresses to the daughters contain *השבועתי*, “I adjure you” or “I compel you to take an oath.”⁴⁹ While this is sometimes softened in translation to something along the lines of (forceful) urging, it is clear that the Hebrew

45 Tod Linafelt draws out this point through a reading of Sappho’s Fragment 31 as well as the Song of Songs. Tod Linafelt 2005, 247–48.

46 Tod Linafelt 2005, 250.

47 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 564.

48 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 564. Phyllis Tribble also discusses the public intimacy of the address to the daughters (1978, 145).

49 Song 2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4.

original reflects a sense of compelling something from someone.⁵⁰ It is not, strictly speaking, a performative, but it is an attempt to act upon another, even over and against their will. Here, it is illuminating to consider the use of the *hiphil* (causative) form *השביע* as it appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. It is used to force others to swear an oath, typically in situations of disproportionate power: thus Abraham uses it on his servant (Gen 24:37), Rahab uses it over the spies while their lives are in danger (Josh 2:17, 20) and Saul over his troops (1 Sam 14:27).⁵¹ Most significant, however, is its use in the Sotah ritual (Num 5:11–31). The ritual seeks to establish whether a woman suspected of adultery by her husband is in fact guilty.⁵² The husband brings his wife before the priest; after disheveling her hair, the priest forces her to take an oath (*והשביע אתה הכהן*, Num 5:19) and to drink the “water of bitterness.”⁵³ If she is guilty, her body will tell the tale: her uterus will prolapse and her belly will swell. Though the woman herself voices the oath, the Sotah ritual clearly describes coercion and masculine domination over the female body and subject. The woman speaks—but it is disingenuous to represent her as having a choice in the matter. She has been seized by her husband, brought before religious authorities, and is about to drink what may well be poison.

Returning to the Song, the Shulammite’s language of adjuration is part of this larger landscape of domination and control. Though there is no physical threat in her address to the daughters, the other uses of *השבעתי* echo in her words. To adjure, even in matters of love, is to hint at the possibility of more subtle forms of coercion. And queer counterpublics, including the daughters, are not immune to such coercion.

6 The House of the Mother

Just as the Shulammite’s conversations with the daughters of Jerusalem construct a kind of sexual public through *speech*, so too does the “house of the

50 Interestingly, *HALOT* gives an additional definition “to plead with someone (*בנות ירושלים* the daughters of Jerusalem) forcefully, adjure,” attested only in the Song of Songs (*HALOT* s.v. *שבע* (hiph.), vol. 4, p. 1399). This strikes me as special pleading and seems to reflect a desire to soften the Shulammite’s speech and perhaps her power as well.

51 The verb is also used by Jonathan to compel David to swear his love (1 Sam 17:20).

52 Like the adultery laws themselves, the ritual is asymmetrical: there is no complementary ritual to determine whether a man has committed adultery.

53 *מי המרים*. The words of the woman’s oath are written down and dissolved in the water, which the woman is then forced to drink (Num 5:19–23).

mother” function as a *spatial* counterpublic. The *בית אם* or “house of the mother” appears twice in the Song, in 3:4 and 8:2:

I held him and did not let him go until I brought him to my mother’s house (*בית אמי*),
to the chamber of the one who was pregnant with me. (Song 3:4b)

and

I would lead you and bring you to the house of my mother (*בית אמי*), who taught me;⁵⁴
I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranates. (Song 8:2)

This pair of references is significant. The phrase *בית אם* is used only very rarely in the Hebrew Bible; thus the two references in the Song represent a relative density. In a comprehensive study of the phrase and its uses, Cynthia Chapman argues that the “house of the mother,” by presenting an alternative to the more familiar “house of the father,” destabilizes familiar patriarchal narratives in (and about) the texts.⁵⁵ It is the mother’s house, not the father’s that is the significant space here; indeed, neither the father nor his house are ever mentioned in the Song. Thus the “house of the mother” is the only space described in the Song of Songs that is both interior (not a garden, field, or vineyard) and definitively not associated with patriarchal authority.

The “house of the mother” is significant in another way as well: it is associated with sex. Interior spaces such as tents and chambers are often associated with sexuality (e.g. Gen. 9:21, Gen. 24:67, Judg. 4:18–21). Furthermore, entering into the mother’s tent or house is an act heavy with sexual innuendo. Chapman writes, “when we read that an adult child enters a maternally designated space—mother’s house, chamber, or tent—it most often sets up the narrative expectation of sex.”⁵⁶ Isaac entering into his mother Sarah’s tent with Rebecca in Genesis 24:67 is just one example of the pattern. The narrative expectation of sex in the “house of the mother” is also present in the Song, where both uses of the phrase appear as precursors to sex.⁵⁷ In 3:4, the woman,

54 Reading with MT *אלי-בית אמי תלמדני*; “the house of my mother who taught me.” LXX has *εἰς οἶκον μητρός μου καὶ εἰς ταμειῖον τῆς συλλαβούσης με*; “to the house of my mother and to the chamber of the one who bore me,” as in 3:4b.

55 Cynthia R. Chapman 2016.

56 Cynthia R. Chapman 2016, 83.

57 Cynthia R. Chapman 2016, 63.

having found her lover at last, leads him inside the “house of my mother”; in the next verse, she urges the daughters of Jerusalem “do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!” (3:5), suggesting that such an awakening has indeed just occurred in the mother’s house. Song 8:2 envisions a similar scenario; the entry into the mother’s house is preceded by kissing and followed by embracing and the exchange of fluids (both “spiced wine” and “the juice of my pomegranates,” 8:3), as well as a similar praise of love to the daughters of Jerusalem. The house of the mother is a sexual space. Moreover, the sex that occurs in this space in the Song is sex initiated by a woman.

Berlant and Warner stress that the queer worldmaking takes place outside of normative, and particularly familial, structures of intimacy. And yet the house of the mother is a familially-defined space.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it is clearly organized around norms of heterosexuality, if not strict monogamy.⁵⁹ Can such a space represent a queer spatial counterpublic? I suggest yes. First, the house of the mother, while contained within the heteropatriarchal house of the father, represents at once a refuge within it and an alternative to it. Turning for a moment from Berlant and Warner to José Esteban Muñoz and *Disidentifications*, we might consider that the house of the mother represents a *disidentificatory* space vis-a-vis the house of the father, at once opposed to straightforward identification and unable to opt out entirely. Muñoz writes, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”⁶⁰ He also associates disidentification with oppositional queer worldbuilding: “Disidentificatory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world. *This reiteration builds worlds*. It proliferates ‘reals,’ or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for *potential* oppositional counterpublics.”⁶¹ From this perspective, the “house of the mother” *performs* family and spatiality in ways that are at once creative and worldmaking.

Second, while the “house of the mother” assumes kinship relations, I suggest that the intimacies of this space are queer. We see some of this queerness in the opening chapter of Ruth, where the “house of the mother” also appears: Naomi instructs her daughters-in-law to return, not simply to their families,

58 Cynthia R. Chapman argues that it represents a subunit of the larger house of the father, limited to the mother and the “uterine siblings.” Cynthia R. Chapman 2016, 67.

59 Though here, note as well that *queer* is not necessarily *not* patriarchal.

60 José Esteban Muñoz 2013, 4.

61 José Esteban Muñoz 2013, 196.

but to the “house of her mother” (Ruth 1:8), in a scene with pulsing currents of female homoeroticism as well as queerness of multiple forms.⁶² Athalya Brenner has likewise argued for the “house of the mother” opening queer possibilities.⁶³ And we might consider that inviting your lover to have sex in your mother’s chamber, especially when “chamber” comes heavy with sexual implications of its own, is rather kinky, if not outright queer. (My students repeatedly raise this point whenever we read chapter 8 together ... they are not happy about “sex in mom’s chamber” at all.) While the house and chamber of the mother are associated with female sexuality and agency, such sexuality and agency are nevertheless counter to the dominant organization of patriarchal power in the text. The house of the mother thus functions spatially, analogous to how the conversations with the daughters of Jerusalem function orally and discursively. Both spaces and conversations are shot through with power; this power can be used with or against the dominant ideological structures. And both hold the possibility of queer ways of being otherwise—the seeds of counterpublics and counterworlds.

7 Erotic Vomiting and Other Modes of the Grotesque

As I have hinted at in my opening, number of scholars have suggested that the eroticism of the Song of Songs is perhaps not so erotic after all. Fiona Black has argued for the *grotesque*, rather than the erotic, as the most salient category for analyzing the bodies of the Song of Songs.⁶⁴ Black further notes that readings of the Song are overwhelmingly, and deleteriously, shaped by a “hermeneutic of compliment” that misreads the text in the most complimentary way possible.⁶⁵ Thus grotesque bodies and dribbling bodily fluids become the stuff of love and romance. And Christopher Meredith has analyzed food and foodstuffs in the Song as examples of sexually charged activities that are “unlovely” and even disgusting, more excremental and cannibalistic than traditionally erotic.⁶⁶ If Black and Meredith are correct about the Song’s perversity and uneasy-making-ness—and I think they are—how is it possible to imagine a queer worldmaking or counterculture? One answer comes in erotic vomiting.

62 On queerness and Ruth, see Rhiannon Graybill 2020, esp. 2–3, 12–13.

63 Athalya Brenner 2010.

64 Fiona Black 2000, 308–11; 2009, 62–64.

65 Fiona Black 2009, 32.

66 Christopher Meredith 2018.

Perhaps the most famous scene in “Sex in Public” is the final one, when Berlant and Warner describe watching a performance:

A boy, twentyish, very skateboard, comes on the low stage at one end of the bar, wearing lycra shorts and a dog collar. He sits loosely in a restraining chair. His partner comes out and tilts the bottom’s head up to the ceiling, stretching out his throat. Behind them is an array of foods. The top begins pouring milk down the boy’s throat, then food, then more milk. It spills over, down his chest and onto the floor. A dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging. The bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can. The top is careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities. From time to time a baby bottle is offered as a respite, but soon the rhythm intensifies. The boy’s stomach is beginning to rise and pulse, almost convulsively. It is at this point that we realize we cannot leave, cannot even look away.⁶⁷

And so, of course, they stay, witnessing a truly climactic performance of erotic vomiting, fingers down the throat, stomach heaving: “we realize that we have never seen such a display of trust and violation. We are breathless.”⁶⁸ As, indeed, are we their readers.

It is perhaps inevitable that in its great success, “queer worldmaking” has often become domesticated. After all, “nothing fails like success,” as Barbara Johnson writes of deconstruction, and as we well might say of queer theory as well.⁶⁹ But the scene that Berlant and Warner present is anything but tame: milk, mouths, food, force, fluids, vomit, revulsion, intimacy—and spectators. A scene not so different, in fact, from the *Song of Songs*. While the *Song* does not contain explicit vomiting, it is filled with bodies that leak, flow, dribble, and ejaculate.⁷⁰ In particular, *Song* 5:2–8, analyzed above, is a scene of sex and fluids, beginning with the liquid upon the bolt.⁷¹ There is also the text’s near obsession with eating and expelling of foods (where food is always also sex, but sex is also food).⁷² And, of course, there is the grotesquerie of the bodies of the *Song*—edible, open, excessive, inviting, revolting.⁷³ Bodies that belong not

67 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 565.

68 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 565.

69 Barbara Johnson 2014. The phrase is not Johnson’s original coinage, but rather a widely circulated cliché.

70 Carey Ellen Walsh 2000a.

71 See also Yael Almog 2010.

72 Christopher Meredith 2018.

73 Here I follow Fiona Black; see Fiona Black 2000, 2009, *passim*.

to a public, but a counterpublic. Building on these readings, I suggest that we can read the grotesquerie of the Song as exemplifying a queer counterpublic.

The publicness of the queer scene in relation to the Daughters of Jerusalem has already been established. To this, we might add that the scene is also made public in the way it invites in (or compels) its readers. Observing that “the Song has no plot to speak of, but it does seem to encourage readers to impose one upon it,” Black notes that the grotesque features of the Song are precisely those that hook its readers.⁷⁴ We as readers, as much as the Daughters of Jerusalem, become a kind of “sex public.” As for the queerness of the scene, as I have already observed above, the heterosexuality of the partnering the Song describes does not preclude the possibility or indeed potentiality of a queer reading of its sex and bodies. But for readers with lingering concerns over the “queer” reading of a “straight” sex scene (between the Shulammitte and her male lover) that this essay has been developing, it is also worth noting another of Berlant and Warner’s comments about the erotic vomiting they are witnessing: “Word has gone around that the boy is straight. We want to know: What does that mean in this context? How did you discover that this is what you want to do? How did you find a male top to do it with? How did you come to do it in a leather bar? Where else do you do this? How do you feel about your new partners, this audience?”⁷⁵ Questions we might ask, with minor adjustments (the house of the mother replacing the leather bar, for example), of the Song.

Reflecting on the Song’s grotesque bodies and desires, Black writes that the text is “electric with intercourse—verbal and sexual” and “implicates readerly desires ... as fraught with yearning and love as those of the lovers.”⁷⁶ The result is a text in which “the line between lovers and readers is blurred” and “we are breathless,” to bring together Black’s description with Berlant and Warner’s assessment of the erotic scene.⁷⁷ This fluid, breathless blurring is the sign of the counterpublic “tweaking, thwacking, thumping, sliming, and rubbing” its way into existence: in the text, in our relations to it.⁷⁸

74 Fiona Black 2000, 321, 322. See also Fiona Black 2009, 186.

75 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 565.

76 Fiona Black 2009, 186.

77 Fiona Black 2009, 187; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 565.

78 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998, 564.

8 From Sex Publics to Public Speech, or, Why Sex in Public Now?

Sex is always mediated; it is always “in public.” This is as true of the Song of Songs as it is of the historical moment in which Berlant and Warner pen “Sex in Public,” or our own present moment. The publicness of sex, moreover, offers a new and different way of approaching the question of public voices, including women’s public voices, and of bringing together the personal, the political, and the sexual. “Let me hear your voice” (Song 2:14) is not just a summons to speech, but to sexual publics and sexual subjectivities. To hear a voice is also, in the Song, to expose a body to scrutiny, to venture into the nocturnal city and face violence for it, to explore the mother’s house (and invite others into it), to look upon bodies that leak and drip and vomit, to consume and be consumed. As a way of viewing and listening to the Song, public sex invites us to hear not just dominant voices and sexual cultures but also sexual countercultures and counterpublics.

“Sex in Public,” in addition to providing a still-bracing critique of normativity, expands the categories of speech, discourse, and the voice. Sex in public becomes a way of performing, even speaking. And if (public) sex speaks (in public) this suggests new avenues for entering into conversations old and new. “Tweaking, thwacking, thumping, sliming, and rubbing” are also forms of public discourse. They offer both a hermeneutic opening into the Song of Songs and a way of connecting the Song to current conversations about sex and power. The public-ness of sex in the Song, as well as the moments of queer worldmaking that the text teases and offers glimpses of, lie at the heart of its political and transformative power.

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FIGURE 3.1 René Magritte, *Les Amants* (IV), 1928
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The Speaker of the Song of Songs and Her Publics

Simeon B. Chavel

Since Medieval times readers have debated whether the Song of Songs is a series of poems and poetic fragments (Yaphet b. Eli identified thirty) or a single poem (Abraham ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and an anonymous commentary).¹ The same phenomena drive both views. Seen one way, relentless interruptions suggest disunity; seen another, the absence of clear beginnings, endings, and transitions suggests a continuum. Repeated content and consistent style support either view—a genre or a poem.²

Those viewing the text as a series often slip into analyzing it as a unity. Rather than treat the characters as *types* figured and fleshed out differently in each of the poems and poetic fragments—the lovers of this poem and the lovers of that one—they treat them as the *very same characters* recurring across them, the Lover (often “the Shulammitte,” based on the one instance at 7:1)³ and the Beloved of the work.⁴ Moreover, they consider the content of the different poems to happen on a timeline: now this happens, next that.⁵

1 For Yaphet b. Eli, see Daniel Frank 2003, 55; Ibn Ezra: H. J. Mathews 1874; Menahem Cohen 2012; Rashbam: Sara Japhet 2008b, 127–146, 233; the anonymous commentary: Sara Japhet & Barry Dov Walfish 2019, 45–58. Codex Sinaiticus (4th cent. CE) and Codex Alexandrinus (5th cent.), have rubrics dividing the entire *Song* between “the bridegroom” (ὁ νυμφίος), “the bride” (ἡ νύμφη), and “the young women” (αἱ νεῦνιδες), which make the text a single poem (Jay Treat 1996, 421). For the rubrics, see <http://codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx?book=29> (images), accessed July 18, 2022; Alfred Rahlfs & Robert Hanhart 2006, 270–271 (lists); Jay Treat 1996, 399–514 (transcriptions and comprehensive analysis).

2 See the survey and discussion in J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 1–87. Almost all treatments conflate the question of authorship with that of the content. But one person can create a series of poems in and as one work, and several people can create together a single poem. This study focuses on the content alone.

3 Citations of the Hebrew Bible = Aron Dotan 2012.

4 Compare how scholars treat the parents of the different units in Prov 1–9.

5 Elaine T. James calls the Song a “set of texts” (2017a, 2) and analyzes selections as discrete poems, but she also produces a brilliant analysis of three body-descriptions (4:1–7; 6:4–7; 7:1–7) as *repeated attempts* by the man to capture the woman’s beauty (2017a, 118–150); namely, they make up a chronological continuum in the world of the characters.

Those viewing it as one poem identify a choice moment that suggests an overarching scenario. Either a woman reminisces to her friends about her absent beloved (Rashbam; the anonymous commentary)⁶ or she recounts a dream (ibn Ezra).⁷ But illustrating the entire work so has proven elusive. None of the attempts satisfactorily demarcates the scenes or explains the continuity of the discourse.⁸

Following the lead of the oldest existing opinion on the matter, the evaluative heading *šir hašširim* that became its name, this study analyzes the Song as one *šir*, one poem.⁹ To do so it synthesizes insights by others about the Song in particular, about biblical Hebrew, and about literature in general. It illustrates that the Song has (1) a framing speaker in an overarching scenario and (2) continuity of discourse—two constitutive aspects of literary coherence. The nature of the scenario (a dream), the artistic choices made to represent it (unintroduced switching between speakers, perspectives, address, addressees, and quotation), and readers' confusion about the Hebrew verb-system (which marks aspect alone, not tense) have obscured the work's structure, continuities, and coherence.

Analyzing the Song of Songs this way satisfies the readerly value of accounting for impediments to reading a work as the expression of a single controlling consciousness, as a matter of design. It also makes the Song a text of womanly voice and agency, public affirmation, and queering subversion.

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6 Sara Japhet 2008a, 127–146, 233; Sara Japhet & Barry Dov Walfish 2019, 45–58, respectively.

7 H. J. Mathews 1874, 10; more recently: Johann L. Hug 1813, 10–11; Pesah Finfer 1906, 66–67; Solomon B. Freehof 1949; Harold Fisch 1988, 88–95; Ilana Pardes 1992, 129–139; Daphna V. Arbel 2000. Many consider the text a dream or dream-like without identifying the woman as the dreamer; some alternate inconsistently between her as the dreamer and the text as merely dream-like.

8 On Rashi, see Robert A. Harris 2023, 109–117.

9 In a unique and important study, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp (2015, 214–226) all but denies the possibility that the written genre of the “long poem” existed in ancient Judea, and of the Song specifically he says (1) it is lyric, which is oral, centered on character, and therefore short, and (2) it lacks the cues that characterize works aware of being written (i.e., “long” ones); to explain the persistent tension between the push to discontinuity and the pull to unity he identifies the Song as an in-between type, the “lyric series.” However, (1) Dobbs-Allsopp does not delineate the units that make up the series or provide the criteria for doing so; (2) the Song may be lyrical but that does not make it lyric (just as it is dramatic but not drama); and (3) Isaiah 40–48 (6th cent. BCE), twice as long as the Song, provides centuries-old precedent for a long poem among Judeans, and it does not call attention to its writtenness (Simeon Chavel 2014).

The Song has an overarching scenario, a woman dreaming now and rendering the things happening in her dream, a present within a present, a case of simultaneous narration.¹⁰ The Song is a dreamscape.¹¹ Dreaming is mental activity that mimics seeing, but dreamers communicate their content verbally.¹² As a figure in a verbal artwork, the dreamer speaks her dream.¹³ The dream

10 On simultaneous narration, see Dorrit Cohn 1999, 96–108. Qualify Galit Hasan-Rokem (1999, 214): the Hebrew Bible “has no dream dreamt by a woman” regarding *Yahweh’s relationship with Israel-Judea*.

11 See *OED Online*, s.v. “dreamscape” §2 “a landscape or image seen in a dream; also: the world of dreams perceived as a landscape;” §3 “a representation of a dream in a painting or other work of art; a work of art which depicts a dream or has dreamlike qualities.” Studies of dreams in ancient southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean (A. Leo Oppenheim 1956; Robert K. Gnuse 1996; Jean-Marie Husser 1999; Ruth Fidler 2005; Juliette Harrisson 2013; Esther J. Hamori and Jonathan Stökl 2018) focus on their reception, veracity, rhetorical utility, literary typology, and so on, not on (the representation of) their pre-narrativized texture, even that by William V. Harris (2009, esp. 1–22), who reviews modern scientific literature on dreams and dreaming with great acumen and emphasizes the salience of “bizarreness.” Psychoanalytic and neurocognitive research, which focuses on the bodily processes and function of dreaming and on the meaning and effect of dreams, generally downplays the significance of bizarreness; where attentive it seeks its sources, aims to quantify it, and emphasizes unrealistic events, situations, and juxtapositions (J.A. Hobson et al. 1987; G. William Domhoff 1996, 213–278; Antti Revonsuo and Krista Tarkko 2002; also G. William Domhoff 2003). For one attuned to the imaginative and expressive arts, the most striking phenomenon would seem to be precisely disjuncture—abrupt appearances, disappearances, shifts, and transformations—which textures countless dream-reports (Jeffrey P. Sutton et al. 1994; Inga Strauch and Barbara Meier 1996, 95–129). Writers of biblical works register their sense of dream-disjuncture; so often dream-telling by narrator and character alike begins with abrupt focalization: “and whoa!” (וְהִנֵּה), followed by participles, verbless clauses, or non-predicating exclamations conveying a state of things (Gen 28:12; 31:10; 37:5–9; 40:5–11, 16–17; 41:1–7, 17–24; Judg 7:13)—the opposite of וְהִנֵּה and other forms that begin non-dream episodes by acknowledging time and effecting transition.

12 G. William Domhoff 2018: 7–8 distinguishes four aspects: the body’s state and activities that produce dreaming; the cognitive experience while dreaming; the dream memory when the person is awake; and the verbal report crafted to communicate the dream.

13 The Song deploys a regular feature within biblical works as the frame of a complete work—the representation of internal thought as external speech. Adele Berlin 1983, 64–72 discusses the representational overlap between internal thought, internal speech, and external speech in biblical literature. See Dorrit Cohn’s (1978, 3–17, esp. 15) analysis of “quoted monologue,” first-person internal discourse quoted by a third-person narrator, which is a feature of and within third-person narration, and the “autonomous monologue,” first-person internal discourse that narrates its own unfolding story and feelings, which is a “genre,” or frame. She (1978, 255–265) also emphasizes how the autonomous monologue overlaps with both drama and lyric, genres invoked often to categorize and explain the Song.

comprises a series of seven dream-sequences,¹⁴ the units delineated by David Dorsey based primarily on where the couple starts apart, comes together, and suddenly is apart again: (i) 1:2–2:7; (ii) 2:8–17; (iii) 3:1–5; (iv) 3:6–5:1; (v) 5:2–7:11; (vi) 7:12–8:4; (vii) 8:5–14.¹⁵

Identifying this set-up draws on three sets of concepts about literature. Barbara Herrnstein Smith develops the idea that what defines literature is its framing speaker. This speaker is not the voice of the writer—all the voices in a text are the writer's—but the voice created to be the voice *of* the text; it quotes all the other characters in the text, but to a greater or lesser degree depending on the work, is itself a character too.¹⁶ Dorrit Cohn analyzes how the framing voice renders the inner thoughts of the other characters, as well as their own, and shows that its varieties turn on different combinations of grammatical person and tense.¹⁷ Different from Smith's theory but overlapping usefully with it, Benjamin Harshav defines literature as a verbal continuum of referents and references, and provides resources for tracing the continuity within each of the Song's seven dream-sequences, as the speaker rotates abruptly between monologuing, addressing her beloved, addressing others, and having them address her.¹⁸

The argument that one scenario covers the entire Song requires analyzing the entire Song. The analysis here will treat only one scene, the first (1:2–2:7), and provide the model for a comprehensive analysis. It should suffice to illustrate the rich and dynamic nature of the discursive continuum that holds the framing dream-scenario together.

The text sets up the scenario at the very beginning, where the woman conjures her beloved (1:2). First she wishes him present to kiss her; then, *mid-sentence*, there he is: "*He* should kiss me with *his* mouth-kisses,"¹⁹ because

14 In biblical works, Zech 1:8–6:16 represents a series of dream-sequences.

15 David A. Dorsey 1990, 82–92 (setting aside other parts of his analysis).

16 Barbara Herrnstein Smith 1978. Literary works may have more than one top-level speaker, which gives them a dramatic cast but does not make them drama.

17 Dorrit Cohn 1978. Any character, not just the framing speaker, may cite another character or give an internal view of their mind.

18 Benjamin Harshav 2007.

19 The pronominal suffix in a construct chain often applies to the head (i.e., the whole phrase) rather than the tail; see Bruce K. Waltke & Michael O'Connor 1990, 150–151 (§9.5.3b), 304 (§16.4e). That she means many kisses on the mouth, "smooching," see ibn Ezra; Sara Japhet & Barry Dov Walfish 2019, 134.

your loving is better than wine.”²⁰ In what situation does an indirect addressee “morph” into a direct addressee mid-sentence? In a reverie.²¹

As it goes, the text draws its dreamer, how her discourse will represent both the state of dreaming and the content of her dream. After the opening, the dreamer continues to address her beloved directly, first relishing his presence, then urging they run off together (1:3–4).

As for scent, your scents are good!²²
Released scent is your name;²³
Thence do young women swoon over you.
Pull me after you; let’s run off!²⁴

Then she renders what happens next, the direct result of her urging him, but she reverts to speaking *of* him:

The king brings me to his chambers.

20 “Better” = more intoxicating (J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 94). Translations of the Song are mine.

21 Compare J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 92–93. Relatedly, Scott B. Noegel (2007) establishes that people in southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean long represented punning as an essential feature of dreams, and the Song’s uniquely rich world of punning bespeaks the world of dreams.

22 The Hebrew has different words, רִיחַ (typically “smell”) and שָׁמֶן (typically “oil, lotion, viscous substance”), but English “scent” covers both; see *OED Online*, s.v. “scent” §§3–4. Declaring his scents טוֹבִים (“good”) here after using טוֹבִים earlier to compare his loving with wine (v. 2 “better”) suggests that here too it refers to sensory potency, intoxication, rapture.

23 In the context, MT תִּזְרַק, a finite passive 2ms or 3fs verb of the root רִיק “empty out,” makes no sense without far-reaching idiomatic speculation and should be judged incorrect. MT’s scoring, which makes שָׁמֶן its complement, adds to the confusion (שָׁמֶן תִּזְרַק שָׁמֶן). The photos of Qumran scroll 6QSong^a (6Q6) show the scroll to be both too fragmentary and too different to shed light (<https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/manuscript/6Q6-1>, accessed July 18, 2022; contra Eugene Ulrich 2010, 739; P. B. Dirksen 2004, 56*; thanks to Sarah Yardney for generous help regarding 6Q6). Best to emend to Hp m.s. part. מוֹרֵק as qualifying שָׁמֶן “released scent” (similar to רִיק with “sword” at Exod 15:9; Lev 26:33; Ezek 5:2; 28:7; also Gen 14:14; so LXX ἀναενωθῆν; see Rudolph Kittel 1909; Dries De Crom 2019: 41–42). The clause means either that her beloved’s name is as potent as just-released scent or that he is famous for his scent.

24 Against MT’s odd scoring, “pull me; let’s run after you” (מִשְׁכֵּנִי אַחֲרָיִךְ נָרָצָה); see P.B. Dirksen 2004, 56*–57*.

This last statement demonstrates three features of her dream discourse. First, she considers her beloved regal, exquisite, the embodiment of sensual awakening.²⁵ Subsequent discourse continues this figuration but also introduces others, especially a shepherd. These figures do not represent separate, independent characters; they are the guises in which the dreamer imagines her beloved, even in the same dream-scene.

Second, in speaking *of* her beloved rather than *to* him while conveying the very next thing that happens between them, she describes the scene from the outside; she narrates it. This perspective revives that at the text's beginning (1:2 "*He* should kiss me with *his* mouth-kisses"). It also establishes that she will alternate positions inside and outside the dream-scene as she goes. Sometimes she will describe it as one observing it, as the dreamer, other times as one participating in it, as the dreamt; and she will shift between them mid-scene.²⁶

25 For the idea of royal beauty see Isa 33:17; Ps 45:3–9, 12–15. On the idealization of the royal in pre-modern times as the embodiment of excellence (as opposed to the idealization of the “average” person in modern times), see R. G. Thomson 1997, 63–70.

26 On differentiating between the narrating self and the experiencing self in first-person literature (in retrospective mode) and the poetics of their relationship, see Dorrit Cohn 1978, 143–172. Randall K. Albers (1993, 1–85) describes the relationship between dreams and poetry, phenomenologically and in literary history, and emphasizes the “double narrative” of dream-poetry, in which the narrator both participates in the dream and observes and interprets it. In biblical works, note how Jacob is portrayed recounting a dream to others and conveying that he watched a scene: “When the sheep were in heat, I raised my eyes and saw in a dream—and whoa!—goats that are mounting the flocks, striped, speckled and spotted!” (Gen 31:10; in the continuation, at vv. 11–12, he says someone spoke to him in the dream and commented on the scene, but that may be a supplement meant to assimilate the dream to those at 20:3–7; 31:24). Similarly, Pharaoh’s dreams situate him watching a scene unfold, but he does not participate in it, both when the narrator tells the dreams and when Pharaoh retells them (41:1–7, 17–24); note especially how the narrator’s discourse moves from describing Pharaoh (ptc. וּפִרְעָה הַלֵּל), via focalizing הַיָּהוָה, to describing what Pharaoh sees in his dream (ptc. עֵינַי עַל-הַיָּאֵר) without referring to him again. See too how a Midianite recounts his dream (Judg 7:13) and, in the “E”-work, how the narrator presents Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Gen 28:11–12, 16a, 17–19). Modern research on dreams indicates that most dreaming (to judge by dream-reporting) occurs as participation, but observation does occur (Michael Schredl 2018, 67). In a separate type or state of dreaming, the “lucid dream,” the dreamer is aware of dreaming during the dream; many people have such dreams, and they can be induced (Michael Schredl 2018, 163–173). Dennis Tedlock (1999) shows how literary concepts and categories like Dorrit Cohn’s (1978; he doesn’t cite her or use her terminology) and neurocognitive dream

Third, the sentence demonstrates that the speaker describes her present, not her past—the dream she is having now, not one she had.²⁷ Routinely, readers take the suffix-conjugation verb (הָבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ) as indicating the past tense (“The king *brought* me”). But the speech and the scene begin in the present and continue sequentially (“He should kiss me ... because your kisses ... let’s run off”), and what comes next in the speech happens next in the scene (“The king *brings* me”). The suffix-conjugation is appropriate because the verb-conjugations primarily mark for aspect (arguably a spatial point of reference) not tense (a temporal one), and the perfective aspect of the suffix-conjugation conveys precisely the describing of a scene from the outside, be it from the past, present, or future relative to a point determined by the speaker.²⁸ Accordingly, the suffix-conjugation may convey what is happening to a speaker as they speak; it situates their position outside the scene, observing it.²⁹

What follows (still 1:4) continues to expand the features making up the dream discourse. The woman speaks and renders what happens next. Inside his chambers, they prod each other verbally. He speaks first; she follows.

research together can elucidate materials in other traditions; in the Amerindian case of dream-reports within mythic stories, the phenomena of “narrated monologue” (Dorrit Cohn 1978, 11–14) and “lucid dreaming” help explicate the mixed modes and levels of the discourse.

- 27 On narrating selves and experiencing selves in first-person present-tense literature, see Dorrit Cohn 1978, 173–216.
- 28 Namely, tense is determined by context. See Bruce Waltke & Michael O'Connor 1990, 346–350 (§20.2), 475–518 (§§29.6–31.6); Pardee 2012. Instructively, taking the suffix-conjugation verb in the earlier remark אֶהְבִּינִי עֲלֵיכֶן עֲלֻמוֹתַי (v. 3) to indicate the past would give the remark an odd, restrictive connotation.
- 29 This fact has two important implications. First, as late as the *Song* (F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp 2005b; Adele Berlin 2023), writers still understood the aspectual nature of the verb-system and used it effectively. Second, the dividing line in the use of the aspectual system is not between prose and poetry, but between events-based discourse (narration, “reportage”) and thoughts-based discourse (expository, expressive). Compare Dennis Pardee 2012, 285–286, 292n39.

- (*He*): We shall reel and revel in you!³⁰
 (*She*): We shall talk about³¹ your loving more than wine!³²
 Righteously (*or*: Mightily) do they swoon over you!³³

New here is that the woman quotes the speech of another in her dream, her beloved. (Later she will quote others.) Furthermore, she does so without introducing the speech, without narrating it. The gendered address in the beloved's speech ("We will reel and revel *in you*," 2fs בָּךְ) conveys that the speech belongs

- 30 I take MT's 1cp modal verbs וְנִשְׁמָחָה וְנִגִּילָה (followed by 2fs object בָּךְ) as the man's coy self-reference (a plural of "modesty," or "agent defocusing"). On the so-called "divergent" use of the first-person plural (and other pronouns), a cross-cultural phenomenon, see Inke Du Bois 2012, 323–327; also Anna Siewierska 2004, 214–215; Johannes Helmbrecht 2015, 182–183; Barbara De Cock and Bettina Kluge 2016, 351–354; Barbara De Cock 2016, 370–374. The burden of proof regarding the possibility or likelihood of such usage falls on those denying it. (Additional instances: 1:11–1cp subject; 2:15–2mp subject followed by 1cp object; 7:1–1cp object followed by 2mp subject by the woman.)
- 31 1cp נִבְיָרָה seems a pivot-pun. When perceived with her beloved's preceding remark, she refers to herself alone, just as he did (see previous note); when perceived with what she says next, she refers to the group of women and includes herself. Basil H. Chamberlain (1880, 5–6; also Jukichi Inouye 1900, 400–401) coined the phrase "pivot-pun" based on Japanese *kakekotoba*, for syntactical play in Japanese literature, when a clause concluding one sentence turns out also to begin another; for examples see Roy A. Miller 1967, 292–307, esp. 301–302; Mark Morris 1986, 578–581 (thanks to Majorie Burge for this reference); Gustav Heldt 2008, 20–32 (esp. 21–22), 235–240 (esp. 237–239), who also stresses the importance oftentimes of the text's written state and the visual nature of the pun. For semantic cases, see Hellen C. McCullough 1985 (thanks to Hoyt Long for this reference). In English-language poetry, Stanley Fish (1980, 147–173) prioritizes syntactical cases, emphasizes the temporal quality of reanalysis, and illustrates that in some poems, the meaning can depend on holding both readings at once; for instances, see Margit Peterfy 2004. In biblical and other southwest Asian literature, scholars mostly identify semantic pivot-puns, but morphological and syntactical play exist too, and the Song is rich with them. Edward L. Greenstein (2008) duly stresses the reader's process and cases of syntactical ambiguity. Following Cyrus H. Gordon (1978, 59–60), scholars in biblical studies call semantic puns "Janus parallelism," but "Janus" is esoteric and many instances have nothing to do with parallelism.
- 32 The comparison of loving to wine again (see v. 2) suggests she has in mind chatter about intoxicating things (see above, nn. 20, 22).
- 33 For מִיִּשְׂרִים (and צִדְקָה) used adverbially, see Isa 33:15; Ps 75:3; Paul Joüon & T. Muraoka 1996, 1:330–331 (§102d), 2:456–457 (§126d). The use is both youthful slang and cleverly germane, as royal ideology associates kings with מִיִּשְׂרִים "justice" (Ps 96:10; 98:6–9; 99:4; Moshe Weinfield 1995). Robert Gordis (1954, 79) proposes a homonymous root יִשְׂר "power, strength," which frankly better suits several instances in the Hebrew Bible, including Song 7:10. In 6Q6 מִיִּשְׂרִים אֱהוּבִים (Eugene Ulrich 2010, 739) "righteously/mightily are they swooned over" the antecedent is his "loving" mentioned immediately beforehand in the plural: דִּדְיִךְ "your (m.s.) loving (m.p.)."

to him. So too her reply to him (“We will talk about *your* loving,” *zms* דִּדְרִי).³⁴ Third, she returns to presenting the scene from her perspective as a participant in it, as one being addressed and addressing in return, not as one hearing and transmitting a dialogue. In her presentation of the dream, her discourse will alternate positions back and forth.

The unIntroduced, unnarrated quotations bouncing between speakers create the impression of a drama.³⁵ But the sporadic narration of action along the way suffices to create a frame around the speech. The woman renders what happens sequentially in her dream-present. Her alternation between describing events as one observing them (with indirect address and perfective verbs) and as a participant in them (direct address and non-perfective forms) creates and maintains the sense of her as a dreamer.³⁶

What follows (1:5–6) further expands the dream’s contours—who else people it, how the dreamer renders them, and how she interacts with them. It also illustrates that an underlying emotional logic can be at work as the dream-scene progresses. The woman addresses her “sisters in Jerusalem”³⁷ and discusses her beauty, which readers regularly misunderstand as an apologetic explanation: she seems unappealing (dark), but ill-treatment by her brothers has masked her true beauty (they stationed her out in the sun). Between her sudden address of Jerusalem women and her apologetic remarks about her beauty, readers all treat the speech as an isolated little poem or poetic fragment.³⁸

34 In Greek, which marks substantially less for gender, the speakers and addressees are unidentifiable, which likely led to the limited, functional rubric found in Codex Alexandrinus, which gives the text the cast of a long conversation (Jay Treat 1996, 434–435).

35 Hence Origen’s (3rd cent.) reading of the Song as drama or dramatic (R. P. Lawson 1957, 21–22 and throughout) and its immense impact, from the more elaborate rubric of Codex Sinaiticus, which gives the content a stronger sense of narrativity and creates a frame either of dramatic explanation or of third-person narration (Jay Treat 1996, 434, 504–505), to interpretations today (Matthias Hopf 2017). On what exactly Origen might have meant, see Joseph R. Jones 1983; Lorenzo Perrone 2006, 81–99. On the overlap between dreams and drama, see Theresia Birkenhauer 2016.

36 For a Medieval engagement that realizes this structure, see Shuve’s essay in chapter 8 of this volume.

37 The semantic range of Hebrew בָּתִּי (like בָּנִי) covers membership in so many types of classes that the much narrower English “daughters” mismatches it both idiomatically and as a default or “literal” translation. My translation aims to capture the shared positionality of the women invoked as a collective and a meaningful public for the speaker, while maintaining the youthful tone of the Song. It also expresses the contrast with another of the speaker’s groups, אֶחָדָי “my brothers” (1:6; also 8:8–9). The antiphony, as it were, between her blood-brothers and her city-sisters produces one of the playful strains in the Song.

38 Elaine T. James 2017a, 27–31 gives a rich account of its continuities with the context (just not the continuity *of* the context).

However, the appearance of new persons continues the process of expanding the dreamscape and establishing its parameters. Before, she spoke about her beloved to no one in particular (1:2 “He should kiss me on the mouth,” v. 4 “the king brings me to his chambers”); now she names a group and commands them directly. Here and elsewhere in the Song this sisterhood serves as a public for voicing various sentiments, a safe collective against which to measure her choices and experiences as she explores her wants. The suddenness of their appearance (and disappearance) is part of the phenomenology of dreams.³⁹

A new understanding of the speech explains its place in the sequence. The situation of being alone with her exquisite beloved in his chambers raises two points of recognizable self-doubt: Is she as beautiful to him as he is to her and should she really be intimate with him now? The text has her address these doubts as a dramatic aside to a safe dialogue-partner, her sisterhood, and both doubts she answers with a Molly-Bloom “Yes!,” which the verse division has obscured:

Dark am I and beautiful, O sisters in Jerusalem,⁴⁰

Like the tents of Qedar, like the curtains of Solomon!⁴¹

Don’t look at me like I am darkened,⁴²

Like the sun gave me a scorching look.⁴³

39 See above, n. 26.

40 Rendering שְׁחוּרָה by the racializing “black/Black” is anachronistic and inappropriate (Alice Ogden Bellis 2021, 91–96; also Athalya Brenner 1982, 98).

41 There is no evidence Qedarite tents were thought other than beautiful such that the reference should underscore a contrast between “dark” and “beautiful.” On the contrary, a semantic pivot-pun here turns on the root קד־ר (1) “dark” like preceding שְׁחוּרָה, and (2) a proper noun, “Qedar” like “Solomon” (שְׁלֹמֹה) that follows and which represents magnificence; the effect makes the two meanings present at once, “dark” and “magnificent.” Alliteration between the two competing words שְׁחוּרָה and שְׁלֹמֹה reinforces the pairing. Together, the pivot-pun and alliteration make a *compound* meaning (*hendiadys*), “magnificently dark,” not a competition of meanings.

42 The reduplicating form שְׁחַרְחֲרִתָּי connotes *discoloration*—splotchy color or a wrong color, not a shade of a color. Note the context of יִרְקָרַק and אֲדָמָדָם (Lev 13:49; 14:37) and אֲדָמָדָם לָבֹן (Lev 13:42–43)—skin discoloration. See too חֲכָלָיוֹת עֵינַיִם (Prov 23:29) and חֲכָלָיִי מִיָּין (Gen 49:12) compared to בְּחֵלֶת עֵינָיִךְ (Ezek 23:40), with ח/כ metathesis (like כָּבֵשׁ/כֶּשֶׁב and שְׁמָלָה/שְׁלֹמָה). Other adjective doublings strengthen the sense of a root, not weaken it: עֲקָלְקוֹת (Judg 5:6; Ps 125:5); חֲלָקְלוֹת (Jer 23:12; Ps 35:6). For the shade of a color, note the form אֲדָמוֹנִי/אֲדָמָנִי “reddish, ruddy” (Gen 25:25; 1 Sam 16:12; 17:42). Compare Eliezer Ben Yehuda 1948, 65n; Athalya Brenner 1982; 1993.

43 Readers typically take the first שֶׁ (in שְׁחַרְחֲרִתָּי) as a complementizer, “(for the fact) that,” and the second (in שֶׁשְׁזָפְתִּי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) as a causal conjunction “for” that refers back to the main clause, “Don’t look at me” (e.g. Arnold B. Ehrlich 1908, 7:3); I take both as complementizers, “(with the idea) that,” such that the second clause stands in apposition

My brothers-of-a-mother blasted me,
 Put upon me guarding vineyards;⁴⁴
 My, my vineyard I do *not* guard!⁴⁵

First, she declares herself truly, naturally magnificent, and warns her addressees *not* to consider her beauty artificial (vv. 5–6a). Then she makes a second, separate declaration, that though her brothers demanded she restrain (“guard”) her sexuality, she does not (v. 6b).⁴⁶

The psychological continuity with the previous lines (1:2–4) is indicated by continuities in the discourse, amplifications of prior elements. The group she referred to earlier as “young women” (v. 3) she specifies now as “sisters in Jerusalem” (v. 5). Her regal beloved, “the king” (v. 4), crystalizes as the famed “Solomon” (v. 5). The “chambers” (already a plural of luxury) in which they tantalize each other (v. 4) materialize as magnificent tents (v. 5). And the intoxicating “wine” compared to loving earlier (vv. 2, 4) becomes an entire vineyard ready to be tended to (v. 6). The main scene prompted doubts; its imagery is put to work in an aside that overcomes them: Her beauty is equal to the tents’ magnificence; she is a match for her Prince Charming’s chambers.

to the first and reiterates it (see Robert D. Holmstedt 2016, 156–158). The verb שׁוּׁ “look” appears twice more in the Hebrew Bible (Job 20:9; 28:7 שׁוּׁפְּתוּ); all three instances are 3fs verbs ending in archaic *t* before the pronominal suffix (Joshua Blau 2010, 191). Because of the topic “dark, darkening” here, the form generates the illusion (or sonic misimpression) of causative preformative שׁוּׁ followed by the root זַפַּׁת (black) pitch,” i.e., “the sun blackened me;” whether crafted or serendipitous, it is a brilliant way to stimulate two meanings with one word.

44 Many understand the verb נָחֲרוּ as N חָרָה “burn, be angry” or חָרָר “burn”; due to the context here and elsewhere (Isa 41:11; 45:24), it should have the active sense (like N לָחַם “to battle”). The brothers were not made angry by prior activity of hers; they instructed her heatedly on a topic they care about. As “blasting speech,” נָחֲרוּ follows שׁוּׁ “scorching look” elegantly (similarly, J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 105). Others understand נָחֲרוּ as D נָחַר “snort” (P. B. Dirksen, 2004, 57*–58*), but it does not suit the context (though later, at Song 1:9, the beloved’s comparison of the woman to a mare might elicit that sense retroactively; see Jer 8:16; Job 39:19–20).

45 Here, too, the suffix-conjugation verbs convey the perfective aspect, not the past tense. The context warrants the present, or even future “will.”

46 As many have noted (e.g. Elaine T. James 2017a, 35–36), the vineyard, vine, and wine all serve as tropes for sexual parts and actions here and elsewhere in the Song (most directly: 2:15; 5:1; 8:12). When describing her brothers’ intent, the speaker uses the generic plural (נָטְרָה אֶת־הַכֶּרְמִים) as if, to them, her sexuality belongs to the family; her emphatic retort about her intent, reversing the order of the terms, fronts a contrasting singular and bolsters it with a redundant independent possessive pronoun (בְּרַמִּי שְׁלִי לֹא נָטְרָתִי).

Her availability to him there is an entire vineyard deliberately made available to yield the fluids of intoxication.⁴⁷

This speech illustrates additional new elements of the dreamscape. The speaker peoples her dream beyond herself and her beloved. She may shift between addressees without narrativizing it. The vocative that invokes the new addressee and captures their attention (“O sisters in Jerusalem”) is a favored form in the Song. And, while her voicing shifts abruptly, various continuities extend the discursive continuum and the dream-sequence.⁴⁸

Next, the speaker ends her aside and returns to her beloved. She expresses a third doubt about their intimacy: if she is available to him now, will she find him tomorrow? Will *he* be available to *her*?⁴⁹ This doubt she addresses to him directly (1:7). He replies at first in a mildly teasing way (v. 8), but then extolls her beauty earnestly, comparing her to his own regally bedecked mare (vv. 9–11).

(*She*:) Now tell me, O whom I love, where do you pasture?
Where do you lounge afternoons?⁵⁰
For why should I be like draped over your flock of friends?⁵¹

47 Cynthia D. Rittenhouse et al. 1994 show that in dreams transformations of objects and characters occur by various types of associations, not randomly.

48 Like representing mental activity through external speech, these challenging forms of fluidity occur elsewhere in biblical literature. In the Book of Psalms and in the Prophetic books, speakers, addressees, and positions can change midstream without coordinating language. In Psalms, see e.g. Ps 55; 91; 93; 137. Regarding the Prophetic books, see Jordan Skornik 2018, chaps. 4–5.

49 The motif “what happens next?”—namely, worry about the fallout to a woman from non-marital sex—recurs in law (Deut 21:10–14; 22:28–29 [which emphasizes the father’s perspective]) and narrative (2 Sam 13:11–20; Ruth 3:1–11). Proverbs features women *not* worried about fallout (they are a trap; see Prov 7); Prophetic literature has Yahweh indict Israel and Judea in those terms (Hos 1–4; Jer 3; Ezek 16). Ps 45:11–16 turns the issue around: the speaker persuades the king’s (potential?) bride of the benefits of marital availability.

50 As “throat,” the organ of physical thirst and quenching, נֶפֶשׁ frequently connotes bodily longing and craving that shades quickly into the notion of the self as an embodied whole (Aubrey R. Johnson 1964, 1–22; Hans W. Wolff 1974, 10–25). “Soul,” with connotations of disembodiment and duality of selfhood, cuts the wrong way.

51 The unusual form שְׁלֵמָה (“for why?”) and the image of being draped (עֲטִיָּה) invite re-vocalizing as שְׁלֵמָה, which changes the sentence from interrogative to indicative (a teasing threat): “Cloth will I be, like draped, over your flock of friends;” maybe return the comparative כִּי שְׁלֵמָה too: “Like cloth will I be, draped over your flock of friends.” See Ps 104:2 (עֲטִיָּה אֶזְכֹּר בְּשֵׁלֵמָה); also 1 Sam 28: 14; Isa 59:17; Ps 109:19, 29 (Ronnie Goldstein, personal communication).

(*He:*) If you don't know, O beauty among women, follow the sheep's footpaths
 And graze your little goats by the shepherds' tents.
 Like my mare among Pharaonic chariots do I think of you, O my love ...⁵²

As nothing in the text suggests their setting has changed, the question resumes their prior conversation. And just as her aside (vv. 5–6) picks up elements of the preceding main scene (vv. 2–4), so her resumed speech and her beloved's answer (vv. 7–11) pick up elements of her preceding aside.

In the aside, she identified with Qedarite and Solomonic tents (v. 5); he says to find him by the shepherds' tents (v. 8).⁵³ She depicted herself among his friends (v. 7); he compares her to a mare among studs (vv. 9–11), as if to say, "Imagine your effect!"⁵⁴ She portrayed him and herself regally (vv. 1, 4, 5); he invokes Pharaonic grandeur and draws her bejeweled (vv. 9–11). Possibly, her references to "Solomon" and "Qedar" prompt the image-set of Egypt, Egyptian royalty, horses, and precious metals—Solomon through a traditional set of cultural associations (1 Kgs 3:1; 9:16; 10; Deut 17:14–17; Isa 2:7) and Qedar through geographic travel routes (south of Judea, on the way to Egypt).⁵⁵ As before (v. 4 "We shall reel and revel in you"), he refers to himself with the plural of modesty (v. 11 "We shall make for you").⁵⁶ Speakers and addressees change back and forth, but various continuities—thematic, associative, linguistic, psychological—maintain the dreamscape continuum.

52 Many commentators analyze the final *î* as the old form of the genitive case-ending, rather than the 1st-person possessive pronominal suffix, so "like a mare," not "my mare." But there is no prompt for this analysis; it produces a relatively rare construct before a preposition; it obscures that the beloved's remark picks up on the lover's prior remark (v. 7); and the phrasing as 1st-person possessive recurs at 2:14 *יֹנְתִי בַחֲגִי הַסֶּלַע בְּסִתְרֵי הַמִּדְרָגָה* (see too 4:16–5:1).

53 For the tight associations between *אַהֲלֵי מִשְׁכָּן*, *יְרֵיעָה*, see Num 24:5; 2 Sam 7:6; Isa 54:2; Jer 30:18; Ps 78:60.

54 It seems more likely that stallions rather than mares or geldings would have pulled chariots in Judea and Egypt of the Persian and Hellenistic periods, and they can be unruly, competitive, and violent where mares are concerned (Carolyn Willekes 2016, esp. 99–101, 147; compare Deborah O'Daniel Cantrell 2011, 24–26 on the Iron Age, which presumes more than I am comfortable with when interpreting ancient sources).

55 These two sets of associations, cultural and geographic, offer a prominent example, in Benjamin Harshav's terms (2007, 1–31), of how the literary work—an Internal Field of Reference—invokes fields and frames of reference outside the text for meaning (frames are units that make up a field).

56 On the plural of modesty, or agent-defocusing, see above, n. 30.

This speech by the beloved expands the dreamscape again. Before (1:4), he exclaimed pointedly his excitement about their intimacy. Here, he engages in his own extended imagining of the woman. To turn it around, in her dream, which entails drawing portraits of herself and her beloved, the woman has the beloved draw portraits of her and share them with her. As a dreamer, she reveals that she likes a beloved to describe her and how he should do so, and this recurs elsewhere in the Song.

Next (1:12–14), the woman speaks another aside. As at the beginning (vv. 1, 4) she addresses no one at all, speaks *about* “the king” her beloved, and uses the telltale perfective, which positions her outside the scene commenting on it, narrating it. This time, she speaks of the effect on her of the adoring love-murmurings he just expressed:

By the time the king is in his/its sheath, my spikenard gives off (נָתַן) its scent⁵⁷

A packet of myrrh is my beloved to me, that/who lies between my breasts⁵⁸

A cluster of henna is my beloved to me in the vineyards of Ein Gedi.⁵⁹

Without a change of scene or setting, she renders the next stage of events in her beloved’s chambers. Their banter has excited her and by the time he touches her, telltale scent wafts from her body. In a new form of continuity, her speech prompts a reanalysis of his love-talk. He spoke of bedecking her cheeks, then her neck (v. 10), then something left vague (v. 11), mildly suggesting movement

57 From 2 Kgs 23:5; Ps 140:10; and 11Q19 מַסְבָּה (Yigal Yadin 1977, 1.211–217), מַסְבָּה should denote something that rings or surrounds the beloved, not something round or around which people sit; given the immediate context, it likely has a sexual connotation, hence “sheath” (compare J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 99). Renderings like “couch,” “table,” and “banquet” (see dictionaries and commentaries) draw on Rabbinic literature, five-hundred years later, and on Hellenistic wining and dining culture, without contemporary evidence of it in Judea, when biblical works early and late already connect such concepts with מִטָּה and שֵׁרֶשׁ (Amos 6:4; Esth 7:7–8; also Song 1:14–16). See already Arnold B. Ehrlich 1908, 7.4. Elsewhere in the Song too the speaker refers to herself grammatically as something belonging to the beloved (4:16 “My beloved should come to his garden and eat his/its sumptuous fruit”). Alternatively, the pronoun refers proleptically to “my spikenard.”

58 I take the second clause (בֵּין שְׁדֵי יָלִין) as an asyndetic relative, because of the imperfective (יָלִין). But the clause could be independent. Either way, as elsewhere in the Song, the antecedent is ambiguous: it could be the metaphor (packet of myrrh) or the topic (the beloved); the effect blends them, furthering the metaphorical identification rather than resolving it (J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 110–111).

59 Here too, the final phrase, “in the vineyards of Ein Gedi,” may refer to the metaphor (cluster of henna) or the topic (the beloved).

down her body; her reference to lying between her breasts, scent in vineyards, and scent emanating from her now suggests that he traced not just a visual trajectory but a physical one too.

As before (1:4), she ceases narrating, and the lovers address each other (vv. 15–17), first he, then she. As before, her reply matches his remark, then expands.

(*He*): You are so beautiful, my love,
 You are so beautiful; your eyes are doves
 (*She*): You are so beautiful, my beloved,
 How sweet; how our bed is luxuriant
 The boards of our house are cedar
 The beams cypress.

The setting not having changed, they speak while lying in each other's arms. After they extol each other, she elaborates about the space they share. In terms redolent with florid sensuality, the bed is lush and fragrant, while the walls and roof, made of the finest woods, make the house palatial (v. 17).⁶⁰ The space has not changed; only the lovers' position in it has, from entering it (v. 4) to lying together there (v. 13). From that vantage point, she looks up and draws his "chambers" as something more explicitly regal, with terms that evoke scent—cedar and cypress.

Notably, voicing all the clauses with "our" (1cp poss. pron.) can be analyzed in several ways. In addition to the woman addressing her beloved and speaking for the two of them, the series can convey the two of them speaking in unison; it can convey the woman not so much addressing her beloved as speaking in his hearing; and it can represent her commenting on the scene in an aside, which he does not hear. Such ambiguity of voicing occurs elsewhere in the Song (5:1b). Here, it makes for a productive transition to the next series of remarks (2:1–3). Again, both lovers talk, and they take turns doing so; but rather than address each other they speak about each other, as if musing in asides. At the same time, each one's aside continues elements of the other's and improves upon the compliment, to make together an escalating series

60 For רָעַנָּה as flourishing, see Jer 11:16; 17:8; Hos 14:9; Ps 52:10; as fragrant, Ps 92:11. On cedar and cypress in temples and palaces around southwest Asia, see Ronny Reich 1992; Jamie Novotny 2010, 128–135; Hanspeter Schaudig 2010, 156–157; Lucy Semaan 2015. Plural "houses" (מִתְּיָנוֹ LXX οἰκῶν), the tail of the construct chain, is conditioned by plural "boards" (קִרְוֹת), the head, but the expression refers to a single house; such leveling represents later biblical Hebrew (Arnold B. Ehrlich 1908 7.5) as part of a much wider phenomenon (Arno Kropat 1909, 8–13 [§2]).

of rolling associations. The series begins with her voice, continuing the floral motif, and like before (1:4, 15–17), it ends with her voice, matching a reply to him then expanding.

- (*She*:) I am a rose of the plain, a lily of the valley
 (*He*:) Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among women
 (*She*:) Like a fruit-tree among the forest trees, so is my beloved among men
 In its/his shade, I crouch with desire,
 and its/his fruit is sweet to my mouth.⁶¹

This segment further expands the discursive continuum, with an extended and sharpened bifurcation between discontinuity of address and continuity in form and content. Within the dreamscape scenario, the dreamer may enjoy the effect produced, of two loving minds so in tune with each other; she savors their twinned secrets. But, as the speakers within the scene do not address each other or seem to hear each other—they speak in asides—the continuity is one particularly grasped and produced by the audience bouncing between the alternating monologues (in dramatic terms: soliloquies), which sharpens the audience's position of listening in on intimate thoughts, of being overhearers.

In her next remark, the woman continues with unaddressed speech about her beloved, but turns from complimenting him to commenting on his activity. With a perfective verb that positions her outside the scene, she describes him as bringing her to a house of wine (2:4).

- He brings/brought me (הֵבֵיאָנִי) to a house of wine,
 And his gaze over me is love.⁶²

It seems like another event: they go now from the beloved's chambers to a house of wine. But what follows (2:5–7) does not develop this new setting; it goes in another direction altogether. Rather, she redescribes the chambers as a house of wine. The statement picks up the beginning, bulk, and end of the chambers sequence in a way that both encapsulates it and brings it to a head. It repeats the sequence's very beginning (1:4), "(he) brings me to." Its two

61 The m.s. pronouns (הֵבֵאָנִי, וּפָרְיוֹ) can refer to the tree or to the beloved; compare nn. 58 and 59 above.

62 That הֵבֵאָנִי = gazing, see Eliezer Ben Yehuda 1948, 889; Robert Gordis 1954, 89; Robert Gordis 1969. Compare too עַל + רָאָה (Exod 1:6; 5:21; Est 9:26); עַל + שָׁקַף (Gen 18:16; 19:28; Ps 14:2 = 53:3); עַל + עָן (2 Sam 22:28; 1 Kgs 1:20; Jer 16:17; Job 24:23; 34:21); also עַל + נָשָׂא עֵין (Jer 3:2); עַל + שִׁי"ם עֵין (Gen 44:21; Jer 24:6; 39:12; 40:4; Amos 9:4).

elements, house of wine and loving gaze, capture the major motifs that animated their talk and activity in his chambers—intoxicating wine and vineyards (1:2, 4, 6, 12, 14) and looking at the lover's beauty (1:5–6, 9–11, 15–16). The image of a house of wine links with the sequence's very last image and sensation, sweet fruit in her mouth (2:3). Precisely these kinds of amplifying rotations have characterized the discourse up to this point and constitute it as a continuum.

This level of reflection adds another facet to the dreamscape. Repeating the expression she used to describe their entry to the space, "(he) brings me to" returns her to that moment, or revives and revitalizes it, which allows her to recast it.⁶³ She recast once before, from chambers to a wood-beamed palace, when addressing her beloved within the scene (1:16b–17). Here she recasts the entire scene as such from outside it: when he brought her to his chambers, he brought her to a place of loving intoxication and insatiable looking.

At the same time, the finality of summarizing and the fullness connoted by the "house of wine" convey together climax, fulfillment, and closure. This mood expands in a crescendo with the final lines of this first dream-sequence (2:5–7). Whereas the previous speech (2:1–4) was consistently unaddressed and its voicing alternated, now the voicing belongs consistently to the dreamer, and her address alternates—between directly addressing a group and no address.

Prop (pl.) me up with raisin-cakes, ply (pl.) me with fruit,
For I am weak with love!
His left is under my head; his right wraps round me.
I adjure you, O sisters in Jerusalem, by the gazelles or fawns of the field:
If you (dare) rouse and arouse love to the point that it desires ...!⁶⁴

63 Such recasting suits perfectly the commenting position afforded by the perfective verb (הֵבִיאָנִי), and warrants rendering it here in the past tense: "He brought me."

64 In my reading: (1) in a highly rhetorical moment the speaker says one thing (*Swear you won't try this!*) and means the very opposite (*You should all be so lucky!*); (2) as a threat, her oath is formulated through *anapodoton* (omitting the result; compare Gen 4:7; 31:50; Exod 32:32; 1 Sam 12:14–15); and (3) the content is arousing love עַד שֶׁתִּהְיֶה פֶּן "to the point that it desires," namely, to its climax (on scalar עַד connoting degree rather than time, "until," see Bruce Waltke & Michael O'Connor 1990, 215 [§11.2.12c]). It is in this playful, irreverent spirit that, in a classic case of paronomasia, she adjures by entities irrelevant to the context and whose names (אֵילֹת הַשָּׂדֶה, צִבְאוֹת) evoke other entities altogether, serious, divine ones appropriate to oaths in general, just not to this one. Compare Jennifer L. Andruska 2019, 43–61, who follows the consensus interpretation regarding the grammar ("until it desires") and proposes that the statement refers to the specific kind of love portrayed in the Song.

The lovers' position lying together continues the dream-sequence (1:13–15, 16b; 2:3b–4). The mood of sweet exhaustion and afterglow represents the next stage in the action. Addressing her "sisters in Jerusalem" and adjuring them not to engage in such activity similarly suggest a moment after fulfillment. Addressing them at this point also creates correspondence with the last time she addressed them, when she first entered the chambers and expressed her determination (1:4–6). The jocular tone of the two statements here, about her exhaustion and her concern for her friends' wellbeing (2:5, 7), shares just how desirable and fulfilling intimacy is.

This final speech expands the dreamscape further. First, she alternates between two kinds of aside, a monologue and addressing a group. Second, the alternation creates simultaneity. The monologue describes the scene: they lie together. The address to her group shares her sentiments while lying there about the intimate relations she just had—both sweet exhaustion and excitement just thinking about it.

The sequence at 1:2–2:7, then, Dorsey's first unit, introduces a speaking character, whose discourse conveys both her dream-state and the dream's content. The sequence begins with the lovers apart. They come together, move to a new setting, talk to each other and about each other, and fulfill desire. The dreamer concludes the sequence speaking about that fulfillment. In addition to addressing her lover and monologuing about him, and having him speak to her and about her, she invokes another group for additional asides, her sisters in Jerusalem. The unnarrated shifts between speakers and between addressees create the impression of watching a drama. The unnarrated shifts in the main speaker's voicing create the impression that she rotates between observer of the scene and participant in it. Both shifts represent the dream experience and convey the dream situation. The manifold continuities in the discourse provide a scaffolding for those shifts of voice, to maintain and propel the discursive continuum that represents her speaking her dream as she has it.

All these elements recur (many are developed further) in the units demarcated by Dorsey, establishing their limits and their continuities. The units vary in mood, theme, scheme, style, motifs, length, and detail. The dreamer does not achieve any discernible change and the action does not move to a conclusion; the action simply repeats, until the discourse ceases in a way that suggests an endless loop.⁶⁵ This implied recursiveness matches the frame-scenario, in

65 See J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 42–45. In my reading of Song 8:14, the speaker demands to feel her beloved moving, not that he flee: "Move (בָּרַח), my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a fawn on the cleft mounds!" Either בָּרַח refers to running generally and the context determines a direction, like הֲלֹךְ "go" but also "come" (Song 2:10, 13); בֹּא "come" but also

which the speaker does not recount something past giving it rounded shape, but renders something occurring in “real time.”⁶⁶

• • •

In a poetic work portraying a dreamer and dreamscape of intimate love, it may occasion little surprise that precious few individuals are invoked. More surprising is how many groups are and the varied roles that they play:⁶⁷

- “sisters in Jerusalem” (1:5; 2:7; 3:5, 10; 5:8, 16; 8:4), confidants;
- “shepherds” (1:8), friend-group of the beloved, potential competition;
- “girls (of Zion)” (1:3–4; 6:8 *עַלְמוֹת*; 3:11 *בָּנוֹת*),⁶⁸ source of affirmation and competition;
- “loves,” “lovers,” and “friends” (5:1 *דּוֹדִים*, *רַעִים*; 1:7, 8:13 *חֲבֵרִים*), larger friend-group of the two lovers;
- “brothers” (1:6; 8:8–9), family to resist and thwart;
- “men patrolling the city” (3:3; 5:7), a threat and source of censure;
- “guards” (8:11–12 *נֹטְרִים*; compare 1:6), a foil for the woman’s independence (and not so different from the city patrol);⁶⁹
- “queens” and “consorts” (6:8–9), a measure of the woman’s beauty;
- “heroes” (3:7–8; 4:4), a measure of the beloved’s majesty;
- “the sleeping” (7:10), a measure of love’s potency.

A study by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998), featured and developed with respect to the Song of Songs by Rhiannon Graybill (in chapter 2 of this

“go” (Exod 10:1; Jer 20:6; 36:5–6); לָקַח “receive” but also “bring” (Exod 25:2a); סָקַל “cast (at)” but דָּלַק “clear away” (Isa 5:2). Or בָּרַח anticipates the simile: he should move like a fleeing gazelle or fawn. The demand to be stimulated occurs too at 2:15, 17. As at 1:13, 14; 2:3, the last phrase, “on the cleft mounds,” can be part of the simile (be like gazelle or fawn that are on cleft mounds) or the main clause (on the [= my] cleft mounds be like gazelle or fawn).

66 Cutting the other way, David A. Dorsey (1990, 92–94) finds sets of correspondences among the seven units, which give the whole a symmetrical structure. In between is Elaine James’ (2017a, 118–150) analysis of elements intensifying across units meaningfully.

67 In my reading, the plurals at 2:15 “Catch (pl.) us foxes!” and 7:1 “Why would you (pl.) look at the Besolomoned (הַשְׁוֹלְמִית)?” address the beloved, not groups (per above, n. 30). Full analysis will have to appear elsewhere.

68 For MT 3:11 “Zion,” 4QCant^a reads “Jerusalem,” while LXX has no vocative at all (details in Dries De Crom 2019, 108–109). The negative associations of “women of Zion” at Isa 3:16–17; 4:4 suggest MT has the earlier reading; the others, deliberate changes.

69 The synonymous roots שָׁמַר and נָטַר, representing a woman’s erotic love by a vineyard, and the corresponding treatment of the woman by the brothers and by the patrols, all together bind the three groups of the brothers, the city patrol, and the vineyard guards as representations of male control and repression.

volume), illuminates the role a public can play constituting love, loving, and lovers. Love, in this view, is not defined as or by the state of lovers' isolation from society. Rather, it is a dynamic process in which lovers perform parts of their love in public, or before what serves them as a public, to mutually reinforcing effect. At the heart of this dynamic process lies the idea that love is a complex combination of transgression, affirmation, and socialization.

Through the dream's seven scenes, the lover invokes groups in order to prompt her justification of love, which has the return effect of affirmation. This role portrays the group beyond an aggregate, as an organic body that gives her voice standing. In this way, the love she represents—her concept of love—comprises neither a discrete action nor a static state, but a series of events and feelings experienced within a framework of moods and interests; the series depends on the voice that voices it, and the voice depends on a public to hear, interact, and affirm. Her intimacy is not intimacy until it has been strained from or through the public (at the beginning of scenes or along the way) or returned to it (in the climactic utterances).

Populating her dreamscape with group after group, the lover works to set off the two individuals at its heart, herself and her beloved, against the backdrop made up by the groups. Sometimes, she works to separate them. This occurs in the action. For instance, in one scene, the lover wishes them to isolate themselves from the women who all love him (who are not present, only invoked; 1:2–3). In another, the sisters in Jerusalem offer to go find the exquisite beloved (5:8–6:1), and the lover's answer puts them off (or leaves them behind) with a musing that sets her alone with him (6:2–3), in which he extolls her singular beauty (6:4–7:10) and she declares triumphantly his singular focus on her (7:11).

This spotlighting and setting apart occurs in the discourse too. For instance, in one scene, the lover imagines herself the finest of flowers (2:1), the beloved goes one further, comparing her to a rose in a thorny thicket (2:2), and she then compares him to a fruit or fruit-tree in a thicket of trees (2:1–3). In another, the sisters in Jerusalem single out the lover as the most beautiful of women and ask what singles out her beloved so (5:9), which she details (vv. 10–16); among other qualities, he is “more spectacular than myriads” (דְּגוּל מְרַבָּה) (v. 10). He responds in kind that she stands out among scores of queens and secondary wives and innumerable young women (6:8–9) and is herself spectacular, like divinely inhabited capital cities dominating their landscapes, like the divinely activated luminaries above, at once alluring and dreadful (אֵימָה בְּנִדְגָלוֹת [vv. 4, 10]).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The anonymous Medieval commentator notes how the beloved's description corresponds to the lover's (Sara Japhet & Barry Dov Walfish 2019, 172). Eng. “spectacular,” namely, “something to look at,” follows Robert Gordis 1954, 90–91; 1969. Cities could be attributed

In one set of conclusions, the lover declares the lovers' intent focus on each other, which leaves the public pointedly absent and implicitly signals the public's exclusion (7:11; 2:15–17). In another set, she invokes a public directly to spur others to such love. Three times, a rhetorical warning against it sets the couple apart as uniquely able to handle it, while simultaneously tempting the warned to aim for it (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). One conclusion flat-out enjoins all would-be lovers to enjoy love's fulfillment (5:1).

The dreamer's voice makes all these publics, controls their presence, their voices and their behavior, and uses them to explore the contours of love and to delineate its limits. She imagines not just couples like herself and her beloved (5:1) and not just wide-eyed supporters like her sisters in Jerusalem, but a range of regulators and even punishers, like her brothers and the patrols.

In addition to all the publics invoked, the dreamer's persistent shifting of address highlights the dynamic itself of address and audience, of voice. Rather than set up the levels of speakers in a particular way and leave the scheme alone to do its work, the speaker calls attention to positionality and to the language that continually shifts it. Speech, the experience insists, is addressing to and addressing about, and must be tracked. Love, it says, is not received or activated, but is a process of shaping through description and sharing.

The repeated repositioning of the speaker within the scene and outside it calls attention to the speaker's double role as solitary dreamer and as participant in a populated dream. Persistently moving between levels this way makes their interpenetration a regular and meaningful feature of the love drawn: not just the couple in the dream, but the dream itself, spoken in solitude, draws sustenance from the publics in it; at the same time, her repeated intrusions into the dream reestablish its constructed, dependent state, which belies both the ontological and the subjective priority of the couple and their publics.

Looked at from the other direction, the powerful, constitutive role of the public and of the audience stands out rather starkly against the background of the person devising it—someone conjuring love in solitude, speaking it and visualizing it into existence, in a loop of simulation and stimulation. The solitary scenario of this text, suggesting and never denying satisfaction, belies the exclusive satisfaction and validity of the love simulated in the dreamscape—even as it is the kind of love chosen to be portrayed and to stimulate. A fundamental tension results. Which, if either, represents the love more real?

the divine luminosity (*melammu*) that both attracts and overawes, like the luminaries, in particular the sun, which forces one physically to look away (see Moshe Weinfield 1977, 28–31; also Hanspeter Schaudig 2010, 142–147).

The speaker's mediating role, creating the densely peopled dreamscape precisely while enjoying a solitary experience, complicates the position of the text's audience. The audience feels itself to be like the groups around the couple, another body on the fluid perimeter of love. Its presence through the textual performance provides another public to hear and affirm the voice of love. At the same time, the framing speaker indulges a dream in solitude—an event defined by solitude—and highlights that solitude with speech so relentlessly mindful of itself only, that it throws up barriers before the audience, who have trouble following it. This makes the audience an intruder, an overhearer, a voyeur. In the terms laid out by Berlant and Warner, this powerful voicing makes of the audience—oxymoronically—an invited voyeur, a public for sex. Following Graybill, the effect problematizes—queers—the heteronormative default and ideal, by having the audience's enjoyment and approval validate the speaker's situation.⁷¹

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71 One cannot reject the interpretation on the grounds that the real author would likely have been a man, and a man would not write such a work. That likelihood is reconstructed on the basis of sociology and history, when the primary source of knowledge about society and culture in late-Persian, early-Hellenistic Judea is literature in the Hebrew Bible written in *and about* the period, which sets a trap of circular reasoning. One *should* not reject it on those grounds either, because always invoking the probability that men authored has the outsized effect of erasing any possibility that women ever authored (thanks to Sarit Kattan Gribetz for driving home this last point). And one should also not reject it on those grounds because they trade in a facile and reified binary that does injustice to the complexity of human identity. One cannot appeal to the implied author of the work to reject the reading, since the implied author is a persona inferred from the text by the audience according to its cultural types, not an approximation of the real author (see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 86–89).

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Speaking of the Other

Interest and Love in Song 5:2–8

Sarah Zhang

Speaking is not merely externalized thoughts, but linguistic action that comes with moral accountability. In an age of Twitter, however, thinking is often minimally processed, and thoughts are swung to the polar extremes by raw emotions sprouting from self-defense. While the problem of the former, the ability of thinking being democratized rather than cultivated, deserves a separate treatment, this paper will focus on the latter, one's ethical responsibility of speaking of the other. This responsibility is expressed in the saying that subtends the said, which is refracted in one's disposition that tints the words. With the belief in the autonomy of an individual, responsibility is often understood in terms of choices that do not impact the essence of the person. Consequently, one's responsibility of speaking of the other is not infrequently suppressed when one prioritizes one's right and freedom, which resembles an animalistic instinct to protect one's interest. However, though this instinct and the amoral stance that it begets appear to be natural and neutral, its assumption—the perception of a self-constituting being construed by rational representation—is untrue. Before one is aware, one's being is already indebted to the other, as the cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual filaments that one uses to construe one's self are constituted by the other. That is, the cognitive and ethical antecedence of the other prescribes one's linguistic responsibility in speaking of the other. It is not a matter of a free agent choosing to be nice or not, but of one who wakes up belatedly and catches up with what makes a human human.

The poem in Song 5:2–8¹ provides a felicitous example for the question at hand, as it interweaves the ethical, cognitive and linguistic threads necessary in cultivating one's moral accountability as a speaker. It invites one to trace the trajectory from a self-perception based on interest, which is supposed to protect and yet wounds the subject, to a reconfiguration of oneself as-for-the-other that restores peace. Along this line, two modes of speech appear in the

1 A more detailed analysis of this poem can be found in Sarah Zhang 2016, 71–107. All biblical texts were translated by the author.

poem: a self-centered dialogue that drives apart even lovers (5:2c–3d) and a public speech that aims for a restorative peace (5:8). The contrasted ways of interest (for-one-self) and love (for-the-other) will help one to chart and participate in the current public discourse.

In brief, to honor ethics' affinity to lyric poetry, I will invite Song 5:2–8 to demonstrate that, though one's initial and immediate inclination is of an egocentric interest, love can realign one's linguistic action to that of responsiveness and responsibility to the other, offering restorative peace for the girl herself and the audience. Song 5:2–8 offers a timely admonition to not speak of the other out of one's interest—even though it is often dressed up in crowd-pleasing causes and rhetorics, for that brings only fissures and failures for all parties. Rather, based on a deeper self-knowledge than animalistic instinct, one is urged to speak of the other out of a difficult love.

1 The Unfinished Project of “Ethical Turn”

While the tide of “ethical turn” has swept across humanities as an acknowledgment of the many faces of truth manifested in human articulations, as a call to own the responsibility of one's linguistic actions,² it is still wanting in a society wherein unity has lost its ground in universality, and public speeches refract deepening social fragmentation.³ Gone also is the idea of the universal human. In place of the Human, one finds functional meaning of being in belonging to social groups.⁴ The belief in the unity of humankind, which had been a cornerstone of modern society, has been torn apart by the force of the adjectives—established or underprivileged, white or black, Euro-American or East Asian, and so on. A convincing replacement, however, is yet to be offered to enable the peace of human society.

In fact, giving up universalism is easy for the contemporary populace. Thanks to video games and social media, the authoritative meta-narrative and the overarching meaning for all are replaced by the fragmented looping of the

2 Works on this topic are too much to list here; for a recent survey of this phenomenon, see Robert Doran 2017. Cf. James Helgeson 2018, 17.

3 While the ethical turn contributes to cultural relativism, its emphasis on one's responsibility separates it from the social fragmentations that react to the loss of a universal ideal by retracting to one's interest.

4 Though classic humanism still shows its impacts as one of the perceived realities, its lingering momentum can no longer bind all on a common ground. For more discussion on the crisis of modern humanism, see Claire Elise Katz 2013; Emmanuel Levinas 2013.

selfsame, as described in the aesthetics of flow.⁵ The information cocoon so built makes sure that one sees what one likes, and what one likes is what one sees. Consequently, the closed circuit hardens one's value system and narrows one's knowledge base, eroding away the ground for relating to and having compassion for the other. It provides a fertile soil for media wars. The media wars that fissure society along the fault line of "us" vs. "them" are charged by a passion of self-defense, peppered with the rhetoric of victimhood/martyrdom, and propagated by the lack of deep thinking and moral accountability.⁶

This paper will focus on the last and most essential issue, namely, one's ethical responsibility in speaking of the other, who first appears as "you" to oneself, and reveals a radical difference that forces one to acknowledge one's inability in being able (as in controlling what is one's own).⁷ This responsibility is not an alien shackle that inhibits the freedom of speech. Rather, as Emmanuel Levinas observes, it is constitutive of one's self and thus precedes one's rightful interest.⁸ Instead of beginning with interest that divides, a starting point in ethics provides the bridge and buffer among contested social groups, toward justice based on love, or charity:

[E]thics does not replace truth with falsehood, but situates man's [sic] first breath not in the light of being but in the relation to a being, prior to the thematization of that being. Such a relation, in which the being [étant] does not become my object, is precisely justice.⁹

Ethics so defined bears family resemblance not to law but to lyric, with the other not construed as a plastic image through social profiles, but encountered as a devolving of responsibility on oneself. That is to say, instead of piling up concrete moral codes of speech, the Levinasian ethics calls attention to the first breath before speaking, of the attention behind the said, and of the unseen but forever present accountability to the other. When one starts the first breath with integrity, one can then exercise freedom in composing expressions fitting for concrete contexts, without losing sight to the *a priori* responsibility.

5 J. David Bolter 2019, 99–120.

6 On deep thinking, see George Steiner 2014, 12.

7 The ultimate Other is God, but as an embodied detour, the trace of the Other appears on a human face. See Emmanuel Levinas 1998a, 167.

8 Emmanuel Levinas 1990, 60–66.

9 Emmanuel Levinas 1996, 137.

2 Oneself as for-the-Other

What does the “I” mean? Different conceptualizations of selfhood drastically alter one’s spoken words. With special thanks to capitalism, the modern era has bequeathed American society the belief of an individual’s independence from, and competition against, an other. It provides the ground to one’s accountability as a moral, civil and legal agent. However, though capable of creativity, vibrancy, and opulence, individualism promoted with self-gratification and without love for the non-I can cause its own downfall. This is suggested by the rising cases of depression, mental illnesses, shootings and suicides in the United States.¹⁰ For an agent with no accountability to the other is free like the chaff that cannot withstand wind (Ps 1:4).

Instead of an egocentric modality of being, Song 5:2–8 unfolds a perception of oneself as-for-the-other, or subjectivity as susceptibility and responsibility to the other. Unlike the unreflected self-preservation that regulates a person’s daily life, this self-perception may occasionally appear in the consciousness in response to a profound intrigue of the other. In a moment that denudes oneself to the baseline level of awareness or the default mode network,¹¹ the feelings provoked are so intense that the mental capacity is overwhelmed into a state of bare minimum function, reducing the mental to a passive feeling of the feelings. Stimuli of such intensity do not occur often, but they do occur in response to the abundance of love, or the despondency of the beloved.

The despondency of the beloved as an awakening moment to reconfigure one’s self-knowledge is lyrically embodied in Song 5:2–8. It is not to be missed that the independent pronoun “I” (אני) is the first and last word of this poem, though her dialogue with the girls continues till 6:3.¹² Additionally, this account

10 Jamie Ducharme, June 20, 2019; Lea Winerman 2019, 80; Bonnie Berkowitz and Chris Alcantara, March 15, 2020; “State of Mental Health in America,” December 8, 2020.

11 In the Vessel, Starr and Rubin experiment, powerful aesthetic experiences have been observed to alter the pattern of the participants’ default mode network. The latter refers to the brain regions that maintain one’s sense of self (body and thoughts), underpin one’s responsiveness to the surrounding world, and facilitate the mental capacities such as imagination and the integration of worlds (the external, experienced world and the internal, simulated world). For more details, see G. Gabrielle Starr 2015, 57–67. This study helps to illuminate the “black box” wherein poetic experiences reconfigure the reader’s moral outlook (Sarah Zhang 2019).

12 Besides framing the poem, the first-person pronoun occurs four times in Song 5:2–8 and counts for one-third of its total occurrences in the Song (1:5, 6; 2:1, 5, 16; 5:2, 5, 6, 8; 6:3; 7:11; 8:10). This linguistic feature highlights the subjective function of the speaker (Yair Zakovitch 2004, 216).

is presented from the subject's vantage point. However, this poem is not primarily concerned with women's right to sexual pleasure or social justice for the abused, valid as these issues are by themselves and in other texts (e.g. Gen 34; Judg 19; 2 Sam 13). Through its unfolding, the poem reveals how the "I" becomes aware of the reality that because of love, her susceptibility to her beloved is constitutive of who she is.

The susceptibility that enables feeling is deeper than the felt female *jouissance*. The latter is marked by the wakening of her "vitals" (מַעֲרָה) *because of him* (5:4), and its fluid and fragrant expressions are framed by the repeated verb of opening *for him* (5:5). At this stage, though aroused by him, her delights are still within her control. Their fluidity also mends her initial fissure (5:2), as sleep is now out of the window. Then at her opening to her lover, the contrast between the always present other within and the presently absent other without tears open the glossy surface of her self-construed world—both as the experience and as its linguistic construct. The abrupt chasm exposes an inconvenient knowledge beneath the bubble of the consciousness: "I" cannot be completely happy by "myself."

Here are a few literary indicators. In the first line "my heart" is preoccupied by a destabilizing presence-in-absence, causing a fissure between I-for-myself (sleeping) and my-heart-for-him (awakened). The unnamed culprit can be deduced from a similar night scene as "the one my soul loves" (Song 3:1, 2, 3, 4). The colonized heart is already in tune with reality, yet the "I" who controls the linguistic action is still catching up. The "I" is aware of this internal fissure and marks it with the 1. But she has not fully comprehended the pluperfect conditioning of her self revealed by her heart. Moreover, in hindsight the pronoun אֲנִי always appears in close proximity to "my lover" (דּוּדִי; Song 5:2, 5, 6, 8), signaling how she anchors herself with him. Furthermore, the traumatic moment in 5:6ab draws the subject out from her comfort zone, in that "my soul" could not help but go out (5:6c) when "the one my soul loves" has left. In coming out from what protects and blinds her, the "I" acknowledges that she is essentially a "me," one who is desirous of her beloved's response. Her self-perception is reversed from an active agent to an antecedent passivity, shown in the transition from the subjective suffix תִּי- to the objective suffix נִי- in the four verbal constructs depicting the failed search (5:6de): עֲנֵנִי בִקְשָׁתִּיּוֹ וְלֹא מִצָּאתִיּוֹ קִרְאתִיו וְלֹא עֲנָנִי ("I seek him but do not find him, I call him but he does not respond to me"). Finally at the end, she returns to the "I" with a reconfigured self-perception. Instead of constituting it through her natural need, אֲנִי יֹשֵׁנָה ("I am asleep"), she presents it through her vulnerability to the other, אֲנִי שְׁחֹלֶת אֶהְבֵּהּ ("faint with love am I").

It should be noted that this new self-knowledge of vulnerability ought not be taken as proof for the patriarchal idea that women are more fragile and weaker. On the contrary, the confession demonstrates her strength and integrity, as she is so true and safe with herself that she proclaims her vulnerability in her public speech to the girls. Moreover, though it sounds like a weakness for an independent being, vulnerability, or susceptibility to the non-I, is also the site wherein one feels pleasure and happiness.¹³ When the site of vulnerability is so well protected, it also bars one from feeling all that makes life worth living. A heart of rock is incapable of belly laughs.

While the one who is deeply in love may readily accept the notion of oneself-as-for-the-other, that idea is often diagnosed as a temporary symptom of lovesickness, which will be healed when the fever runs its course. This opinion is right about the intensity being temporary but mistakes the symptom with what it reveals. Lovesickness may be short-lived, but in its intense moment it exposes one's susceptibility to the other. Sages of different cultures have observed that humans have an innate compassion to an other, as shown in the panic at seeing a child drowning,¹⁴ "the innate repugnance to see his kind suffer,"¹⁵ or "the mirror mechanisms" in the brain that enables empathy.¹⁶ In other words, the admonition of oneself-as-for-the-other is but a response to this precondition already ingrained in human beings; lovesickness only provides the optics to see it pellucidly.

Following the trajectory of self-reconfiguration, the girl's two speeches before and after her wounding (5:3–4, 8) form an educating contrast. In the first, an unmarked dialogue between the lovers across the unnamed door highlights the lovers' shared emphasis on "I, me, and my," which leads to the missed meeting and the following traumatic moment. In the second, the girl reshapes the previous account as ground for her admonition to the Jerusalem girls. But unlike other occasions (2:7, 3:5, 8:4) that elevate from their previous lyric moments to the thematic message of not arousing love before it is ready,

13 Brene Brown 2010. "The Man in a Case," an opposite example envisioned by Anton Chekhov, shows through an extreme case how the benign and justifiable self-protective instinct erases joy and meaning in life (Anton Pavlovich Chekhov 2000).

14 "When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress ... The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence." (Mencius 2020).

15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1997, 152.

16 David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese 2007.

this one lingers on the previous lines and reveals her response after the trauma, that is, she wants her beloved to know that love exposes her vulnerability. Also, the same message (חולת אהבה אני) is proclaimed during love's superabundance (2:5), the opposite of the lover's despondency here. The two extremes strip off her normal, protecting layers, and lay bare her susceptibility to the other as the pluperfect conditioning of her self. In the following I will briefly unpack these two speeches in light of this contrast.

3 Self-Centered Dialogue

With the speakers being omitted, the emphasis on oneself in the first speech craftily demonstrates how an agreement on "me first" divides even lovers who desire to be together. In the boy's speech, the ethical dative directs the benefit of the imperative to himself: "open *for me*!" His ardent request is then metered by the beats of his sevenfold self-reference י- ("I, me, and my"). The self-absorbing predisposition also aligns the girl ("my sister, my dear, my dove, my perfect one") with what is his ("my head," "my locks"). The girl picks up this egocentric voice, fills it with her own concerns and shoots right back: "how could I?" She responds first not to his thematic request but to his underlying tone: you have your "my," I have my "I." When both parties insist on their own selves, they are stuck inside the diving bells of their being, turning toward but paradoxically away from each other.

Then again, the lyrics in the Song never mean only one thing. Under the slightly obnoxious exchange of self-centered words, the lovers coyly seduce each other through their verbally presented images: he with his wet locks, she with her feet washed and her clothes off.¹⁷ Is it any wonder that the boy tries to help himself in by reaching his hand through the hole, or that she in turn is aroused by this visual stimulus to open for him (5:4)? The visual erotic stimulus is so strong for the girl that "my vitals" churn and side with "my heart," against the "I" that wants to sleep. The internal faculties of the girl are then unified through one realization: it is all "because of him" (5:4). Realizing the importance of the other, she is ready to open for him.

17 Hess notices that at "a second level of meaning," the dampness of the male lover's head and locks provides "the greatest sexual interest," (Richard S. Hess 2005, 171).

² I am asleep, but my heart is awake ...	אני ישנה ולבי ער
The voice of my lover pounding—	קול דודי דופק
“Open for me, my sister, my dear,	פתחי־לי אחתי רעיתי
my dove, my perfect one!	יונתי תמתי
For my head is drenched with dew,	שראשי נמלא־טל
my locks with the drops of the night!”	קוצותי רסיסי לילה
³ “I’ve taken off my robe,	פשטתי את־כתנתי
how can I put it on?	איככה אלבשנה
I’ve washed my feet,	רחצתי את־רגלי
how can I sully them?”	איככה אטנפם
⁴ My lover extends his hand from the hole;	דודי שלח ידו מן־החר
and my vitals are stirred because of him.	ומעי המו עליו
⁵ I rise to open for my lover,	קמתי אני לפתח לדודי
as my hands drip myrrh,	וידי נטפ־מור
and my fingers, flowing myrrh,	ואצבעתי מור עבר
upon the handles of the bolt.	על כפות המנעול

With her opening to him, love appears as though a sickness to one's being, for it drives one to do things detrimental to one's interest (cf. 5:2, 3). Instead of keeping one in the protecting bubble, love wakes one up for the full flame of being alive, at the risk of being hurt.

However, her lover turns away (Song 5:6). In this act of turning away, as abruptly as he had come and thrust his hand through the hole, he tears apart the pseudo-narrative plot along the line of one and the other, which is hinted at in her initial fissure and magnified in their self-centered dialogue. Is his leaving because his sense of shame has caught up, after he had tried to break in without her consent? Or is it a lyric sign of his precariousness that showcases the otherness of the other beyond one's control? The lyric silence on the cause of his leaving blocks the readers' wandering curiosity and bounces their attention back to her response. As the one her soul loves has turned away, her soul is poured out after him. Because of love she can no longer pretend an indifferent distance. The desire of proximity to the precarious other draws her out of her comfort zone. And after him she goes (Song 5:6).¹⁸

18 It is worth noting again that even when she goes outside, as long as she is locked in the active agency, she stays within an invisible shell. However hard she tries, it does not open to the other. Only when she is reduced to feeling her subjectivity as passivity does she arrive at the site where an encounter with the other can happen.

4 Dramatized Passive Wound

A person's words in response to trauma aptly reveal one's self perception. In contemporary American public discourse, for example, the moral high ground often appealed to is victim mentality, characterized by a righteous sufferer fighting against the elite evil-doers. This voice resounds the cries of the psalmist (Ps 3:7; 6:8–10; 7:8–9 etc.) and the prophets (Amos 4:1; Mic 3:9; Isa 3:14, 5:8 etc.), which often set the righteous and afflicted “me”/“us” against the evil and established “them.” Though the dichotomous paradigm fits those approved instances in the scriptures, it cannot be uncritically applied through the keyword “me”/“us” in any socio-political situations. When this is used as a rhetorical means to promote the interest of a certain social group, it becomes detrimental to the credibility of justice as a common ground of public discourse. An emphasis on one's own self-interest, like the lovers in Song 5:3–4, will spur the other party to defend their own interest, resulting in a greater social chasm that will be at the mercy of power struggles. In the end the underprivileged will sacrifice the most.

So let us return to the poem and see how the girl speaks of the other after her wounding moment.¹⁹ While commentators struggle to explain (away) the bizarre violence by interpreting it as a dream or fantasy,²⁰ a better explanation can be found in the lyric genre and a more precise identification of her trauma. First, accustomed to the narrative mindset in its linear and factual modality, interpreters may carry this predisposition into reading the words of a poem. However, not all words are created equal. As an artwork of words, poetry employs verbal signs to touch one's sensibility as paintings do with visual elements. For instance, in Caravaggio's painting “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas,” Thomas is shown poking at the resurrected Jesus' open wound. This vision triggers the beholder to activate the cortical network of areas that are related to tactile sensation and evoke the feelings of pain and discomfort, in the same way when one would be so poked.²¹ Similarly, the verbal signs in lyric poetry embody and enact a meaningful moment through the link between

19 Compared to her first and peaceful outing at night (Song 3:1–5), in Song 5 she has done nothing different when she is out that would justify the assaults this time around. An explanation based on social customs is beside the poetic flow. Cf. Yair Zakovitch 2004, 218; Othmar Keel 1994, 195.

20 For instance, while Longman insists that “we understand the poem as a poem, not as a dream or an event,” the difficulty to understand the violence in 5:7 forces him to admit that “the movement of this part of the poem is better understood as a dream than as an actual event” (Tremper Longman III 2001, 169).

21 David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese 2007.

the said (including lyrical aspects such as semantics, syntax, sound, and imagery) and their evoked feelings, emulating in the audience's altered sensibility how the original moment had affected the poet. That is to say, to do justice to Song 5:6–7 as lyric poetry, one first considers *how these lines affect*, instead of *what it is they depict*.

In the lyrical flow, when the girl's expectant pleasures fall into a cold despair (5:6a–c), the initial fissure within her is externalized as the non-coincidence between “my lover” within and “my lover” without.²² Though his trace is felt intimately in her heart, *he* is beyond her control. Bound by her loving attachment to him, the precariousness of the other reveals the passivity of her susceptibility to him. This is verbalized in the four verbs of her search-but-find-not sequence (5:6de): she seeks him, but she does not find him; she calls him, but *he* does not respond to *her*. The subject, in spite of having the authority and power of speaking, at the end of the sequence reduces her self-awareness to the accusative state. Correspondingly, the lyrical progression also performs her deepening perception of his absence, from the objective suffix ך in the first two verbs to the weakened ך in the third, to the evaporation of any inscriptional trace of “him” in the forth. This brisk shift marks the turn of her self-identification from an independent, active agent (cf. 5:3) to its prior state of passivity and susceptibility. This reduction is further dramatized in the guards' removing of her wrap (5:7d). It is no coincidence that the *inclusio* formed by שמר (“to guard, protect”) underscores a telling irony: what intends to be a measure of protection does not protect but wounds her. One ventures to postulate that, “the guards of the wall” personify her self-protective inclination in their dialogue. It is supposed to protect and yet it wounds her, by letting her beloved slip away. This lyrical thread is more conspicuous when viewed in comparison to the first night scene (3:1–5). The initial difference in the girl's disposition to her lover—searching single-mindedly vs. conflicted internal voices—signals their different outcome. One leads to a satisfying encounter of her beloved, while the other, the despondency of the beloved. Appearing as props in both scenes, the guards are employed to help express her emotional flows in two different emotional landscapes.

Moreover, taking the detour of poetic imagery as a means of expression, the lyric drama of encountering and being beaten by the guards evokes a speakable pain, so as to express an unspeakable pain when her life force (נפש), that which makes who she is, pours out at the disappearance of her lover (5:6c).

22 Note how the conjunction ך accentuates the divide between the two occurrences of ך, as it does to “my heart” and “I” in 5:2.

The guards' assaults and her beloved's disappearance both incite a feeling of being wounded: the beloved wounds her by despondence and the guards hurt her actively. She cannot directly bring a passive wound into her speech without betraying the salient passivity, for speech is already an active control of the situation, and words are too active to reach where it hurts. Hence, through the detour of lyrical dramatization, the violence enacted upon her in 5:7 functions as her emotional rehabilitation of a trauma that is too passive for her active articulation. It is not exactly the same pain, but it is as close as she can bring to words.

Though undesirable, the wound left by her beloved's despondency awakens her from the illusion that she can do "me first." Instead, the trace of the other is antecedent to and underpins her self-constitution.

5 Love, Vulnerability, and Oneself (5:8)

Though the ceasing of activity and the stripping of covering in 5:6 indicates the girl's passivity within the sphere of the depicted, at the level of speaking she still controls the linguistic action. That is, she who speaks cannot reduce herself to a complete passivity. Also, though a radical reduction would emulate the pre-originary site of subjectivity, it cannot shoulder the ethical responsibility, which requires the action of an accountable agent. Hence, after a suggestive rather than an exhaustive report on passivity, the "I" returns with another speech. This time, it originates not from self-interest, but from her newly acknowledged susceptibility to the other.

The introductory formula in 5:8ab prepares the audience for the thematic refrains of the Song, especially the standard exhortation—"do not arouse and do not wake up love until it is ready" (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). This dictum could have wrapped up 5:2–7 as a case of premature waking and reinforce the thematic statement. It is striking, therefore, that the subject trades this for a unique plea that circles back to the search for her lover, through the detour of the girls.

⁸ I adjure you,
daughters of Jerusalem,
If you find my lover,
what would you tell him?
—"Faint with love am I."

השבעתי אתכם
בנות ירושלם
אם־תמצאו את־דודי
מה־תגידו לו
שחולת אהבה אני

Attracted to him but reduced to a passive state, she can neither continue nor give up her search. In a circumventing way similar to how the guards enacting the passive wound that her beloved has left, she expects the girls to continue her search and to send him her message.

Moreover, her message to him (5:8e) offers the delayed response to her wounding. Instead of an accusation of *the guards*, she confesses her vulnerability to *her beloved*. On the one hand, the orientation to him echos her heart's preoccupation in the beginning, and reaffirms her critical realization that it is all because of him. On the other, this verbal action furthers the guards' stripping of her wrap in the direction of denuding herself. The similarity measured not by narrative coherence but by lyric expressiveness, reminds the audience that, from beginning to end, the girl owns all the words in the poem. If the language of power must be used, in this poem she stands atop of the power hierarchy, not the boy or the guards. And yet, she does not use the power to conclude the pseudo-narrative with a victim's demand for retribution, but redefine her self with vulnerability to the beloved other, exposed by herself in the linguistic action and by love in the lyric drama.

Subjectivity is a provoked initiative, which responds to, and seeks peace in, the responsiveness of the other, short of which it is imploded as insomnia (5:2) and denuded into vulnerability (5:8). Though in this poem she responds to him belatedly, her final confession ensures that she will soon celebrate with her beloved their mutual love (6:3) and be adored as the one who brings peace (8:10).

6 The Saying of Love

Before concluding this paper with a note on how love could fit in the dynamics of public discourses, I would like to clarify two issues. First, the idea of identifying a woman with passivity and vulnerability to a man, in spite of a scene of physical abuses, might be repulsive to a feminist sensibility. In the context of this poem, it is worth reiterating that the self-revealed vulnerability demonstrates the girl's strength. She controls what and when words are spoken in this poem, and she admits publicly her vulnerability. In social and legal contexts, there should be no doubt that justice must be given to a woman who has been assaulted. And when it is not, we are all burdened to support the wounded in their just request. In this spirit, I honor the feminist interpretations that draw attention to and condemn the violence against women refracted in the physical assaults in 5:7.²³ Again, I would like to underscore that the interpretation

23 Fiona Black 2001; J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 198.

proffered in this paper should never be taken out of the lyric context and used to promote male dominance.

Second, while this paper focuses on the pre-originary site that constitutes oneself, it should be acknowledged that humans are embodied beings living in concrete settings. To secure resources, the strifes and plights of existence have already pitched people against people, nation against nation. A passivist and compliant approach would only assist the crimes of misogyny and bigotry and make the fattened heart of the privileged happy. Again, on the platform of social justice, power struggles are not optional, and peace does not come if not fought for.

Yet on the order not of ontology and politics, but of ethics, there is a precedence of the other over the self—whoever it is that utters the pronoun “I.” Before I know, I am already in a state of being summoned by the other. The beginning of the “I,” therefore, is not *cogito ergo sum*, but a Hebraic *הֲנִי*, “here I am”—my here-and-now in response to you. Being human means one cares for the other before consciously thinking about it. It shines bright in adversities, and brightest when one lays down one’s life for the other. Such charity for the other, a naïve kindness that baffles the shrewdest, is perhaps best illustrated in Ruth’s devotion to Naomi in 1:16–17. Is it for nothing that one loves the other? Before Job going through his trials and debates, Ruth would pass the Inquisitor’s probe with her untarnished compassion that bespeaks the humanness of the human. Instead of blatant self-interest, this attentive predisposition offers us hope for an originary and sustainable foundation of human society.

Though “love” (*אהבה*) is verbalized only once in Song 5:2–8, its moving tide carries the whole poem: the initial insomnia, the visual intrigue of his hand that heals her internal fissure, his withdrawal that draws out her soul, his non-responsiveness that exposes her passivity, and her confession of vulnerability to him. Indeed, the reversal of the girl’s self-perception from for-oneself to for-the-other is only possible when she is in love with him. If love is not subtending a relationship, one will be settled in the shell of self-protection and raise the wall of indifference to the other. Song 5:2–8 teaches that these protective layers are not only inauthentic to oneself, but also preventing love from breathing life into oneself.

In chapter 1 of the present volume, Elaine T. James promotes a “reparative feminist reading strategy.” Traditional feminist interpretations based on a hermeneutics of suspicion tend to pin the beating in 5:7 as a token of sexist ideology. Their critical energy is then directed toward attacking the injustice of the patriarchal order, as if, in a delayed and virtual fight, punching back the assaulting

males on behalf of the girl in 5:7. It is an honorable response and would inspire a resounding cry of "Yes!" from women who have been abused. All these merits granted, James nevertheless suggests that the text of the Song, especially 5:7, can do more than criticize the wrong. The reparative feminist reading strategy moves further and generates a restorative solidarity with readers who are victims of violence.

With love as its intended performative effect, a personal reading of the Song 5:2–8 should not stop at the confrontational stage, allowing the wounded to be negatively defined by perpetrators (whether ancient or contemporary, imaginary or real). The negative remains parasitic of the wrong, while the Song is capable of offering a healing solace and regenerating wholesomeness. The girl's final speech encourages other girls to be truthful to themselves, and to be so strong that they are not afraid of being hurt for loving the other.

Facing brokenness and wounding, one may choose to deny it, by repression or revolt, by brushing up the surface or throwing out the unsavory. Beyond such binary reactions, the Japanese art of Kintsugi offers an intriguing alternative.²⁴ Embodying the aesthetics of Wabi-sabi that embraces imperfection, it lovingly mends the broken pottery with gold lacquer, re-creating it into a new work of healing and beauty.

While both the world at large and one's self are fissured, where does one begin when entering the public discourse? Is the saying, the first breath, that of interest or love, of division or restoration? May every "I" that speaks, speak with love for the other.

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24 For more details, see Bonnie Kemske 2021.

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The Song, Cixous, and *écriture féminine*

F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp

“We are ‘black’ *and* we are beautiful.”¹ This phrase closes one of the early sections in Hélène Cixous’s “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays.”² Indeed, it constitutes one of the essay’s finer rhetorical moments.³ As V. Andermatt Conley notes, Cixous is “mocking Freud’s statement that describes women as the black continent.”⁴ Cixous had made clear her debt to Freud a few pages earlier in “Sorties,” where she states that “the ‘dark continent’ trick has been pulled on” women—the language itself and especially the use of quotation marks clearly signal the quotation.⁵ And she uses the language of darkness—“black,” “dark,” “night,” “shadows,” “apartheid,” “Africa,” “wrapped in veils,” and the like—to figure the repression of women throughout these initial sections. Freud’s image is patently racist and misogynist, and this the “triply marginalized” Cixous—woman, Jew, and Algerian colonial⁶—can only abhor.

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- 1 An abbreviated version of this essay appeared in 2006 as “I am Black *and* Beautiful: The Song, Cixous, and *écriture féminine*,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. C. Pressler and L. Day, 128–40 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox).
 - 2 In H. Cixous and C. Clément 1986, 69. It also occurs in H. Cixous’s similarly minded though substantially briefer 1980, 248. Both H. Cixous 1980 and H. Cixous and C. Clément 1986 were originally written during the same period (1975) and have much in common, including a great deal of shared language. For the purposes of this essay, I’ll be using H. Cixous 1986 as my main touchstone for Cixous’s oeuvre.
 - 3 The fuller quote enables a better sense of the force of Cixous’s thought here: “We, coming early to culture, repressed and choked by it, our beautiful mouths stopped up with gags, pollen, and short breaths; we the labyrinths, we the ladders, we the trampled spaces; the stolen and the flights—we are ‘black’ *and* we are beautiful.”
 - 4 Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, 37–38. The image itself comes from Freud’s own essay on “Femininity.”
 - 5 H. Cixous 1986, 68. As is well known H. Cixous’s thought and writing is deeply indebted to and engaged with the discourse of psychoanalysis, e.g., Freud’s Dora case features prominently in Cixous’s writings (1973, 1983). Cf. N. Goodman’s discussion of the varieties of quotation (1978, 41–56).
 - 6 H. Cixous’s own (intersectional) autobiography has profoundly shaped her writing and thought: “I come, biographically, from a rebellion, from a violent and anguished direct refusal to accept what is happening on the stage on whose edge I find I am placed, as a result of the combined accidents of History. ... I learned to read, to write, to scream, and to vomit in Algeria” (H. Cixous 1986, 70). And of her triply marginalized status—an Algerian French Jewish girl—she observes:

But Freud tells a certain truth about sexual difference as well with his image and this Cixous wants to retain. "She chooses not to take the route that denies sexual difference(s)," explains Andermatt Conley, "but to accede to a play of differences that would not turn into oppositions. ... Cixous intimates that black is a neutral term until it is charged with a negative value in a system of oppositional hierarchies."⁷ Hence, what Cixous does so effectively here is to retain the important notion of sexual difference(s) informing Freud's image while charging the image itself with positive (instead of negative) value. She achieves this by borrowing language from the Song of Songs: "I am black and beautiful" (1:5). The (Hebrew) Bible features prominently among Cixous's ancestral texts, those texts without which, she says, "I could not live."⁸ The Bible was her "first great theatre," and thus "a very familiar universe since childhood."⁹ Here she has the narratives uppermost in mind—the garden story, Moses, David, Jonah. Exposure to biblical texts "without characters," as she describes them, came later though their impact was no less significant. Among these she singles out the "Canticle of Canticles" and recalls reading them all "with definitive emotion"—"they have become accompaniments for all time."¹⁰ Biblical language and allusions abound in her writing. As was the case with Freud, language and the use of quotation marks sign Cixous's linguistic debt.¹¹ But here,

"Women: at that time I wasn't thinking about them. At that time occupying the stage in a way that I could plainly see, the battle to death was the battle pitting colonial power against its victims. Beyond that I perceived it was the imperialist result of capitalist structure and that it intensified the class struggle by deepening it and making it more monstrous and inhuman: the exploited were not even 'workers' but, with racism's assistance, something worse—subhuman; and the universe could pretend to obey 'natural' laws. War was on the horizon, partially concealed from me. I wasn't in France. I didn't see betrayal and collaboration with my own eyes. We were living under Vichy. I perceived its effects without knowing their causes. I had to guess why my father couldn't do his work, why I couldn't go to school, et cetera. And I had to guess why, as a little white girl informed me, 'all Jews are liars,'" (H. Cixous 1986, 131n6).

See further H. Cixous 1998; cf. H. Anderson, 2017.

7 Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, 37–38.

8 H. Cixous 2008, 38.

9 H. Cixous 2008, 41, 40. Cixous cites the Bible as a primary provocation of her coming to writing: "To fight against the law that says, 'Though shall not make unto thee any graven image. ...'" [Exod 20:4, KJB] (H. Cixous 1991, 3).

10 H. Cixous 2008, 41.

11 Andermatt Conley would appear to understand Cixous's setting "black" in quotation marks to indicate a primary reference to what Andermatt Conley calls "the black continent." While the allusion to Freud is beyond doubt, it is an *allusion* and not a quotation. Cixous uses Freud's phrasing "dark continent" several times over in H. Cixous 1986 (68; cf. H. Cixous 1980, 247, 255; the same language appears as well in the writings of Luce Irigaray, another contemporary French feminist thinker deeply engaged with Freud), the

too, the sense and tone she gives to the phrase jibe well with its use in the Song; in fact, Cixous's reading offers an illuminating gloss on this biblical line.

Like Cixous, the young woman of the Song (sometimes called the Shulammite, after 7:1) embraces a negative perception that nonetheless tells a particular truth and makes it into a positive symbol of self-identity. What is at issue in this line is the young woman's unique beauty. A light and ruddy complexion was considered the normative image of beauty for the elite of the day (cf. 1 Sam 16:12; 17:42; Song 5:10; Lam 4:7; 1QapGen 20.4). In contrast, the young woman's skin is dark, blackened, as we are told (1:6), from prolonged exposure to the hot Mediterranean sun while working in the vineyards. In 1:5 the young woman names her blackness, classifying herself among things that are black (e.g., the tents of Kedar),¹² and then defiantly and most affirmatively pronounces this blackness beautiful. Thus, the strong contrastive note registered in the Vulgate's *nigra sum sed formosa* ("black am I, *but* beautiful"), for example, has good warrant.¹³ However, the syntax of the Hebrew is equivocal. The simple Hebrew conjunction—the so-called conjunctive *waw*—is used both conjunctively and disjunctively and not all contexts are equally insistent on just one sensibility.¹⁴ The conjunctive reading in this instance is grammatically just as viable, as, for example, is shown already in the Syriac Peshitta,

first of which, as noted above, is set off in quotation marks. Therefore, "black" set apart in quotation marks is more likely intended to point the reader elsewhere—to the Song, where the exact language occurs. It is just this kind of precise attention to language of which Cixous is so fond.

- 12 The word order of this verbless clause, *predicate + subject* (*šēhôrâ ʾānī*), identifies it as a clause of classification, according to standard biblical Hebrew grammar (*IBHS* §8.4.2). The addition of a conjoined predicator, *wēnāʾwâ*, after the subject does trouble the syntax, and thus allowing for the contrastive note to be entertained. The reference to "the tents of Kedar" is wonderfully multivalent in a way that Cixous would appreciate. The reference literally may be to the tents themselves, which as M. Pope points out (Marvin H. Pope 1977b, 319), if made in the later Bedouin fashion, would have been "woven from wool of black goats." The phrase may also be taken as a metonym for the Kedarites who were a well-known North Arabian nomadic tribe—the Rg. comes close to this: *ʾtqdrw ʾpyhwn kbnyy kwš dšryn bmskny qdr* "their faces are black as the Cushites who dwell in tents of Kedar" (the play on the root *qdr* is made explicit). But in either case the Hebrew root itself (*qdr*) implies "darkness" (esp. Sir 25:17; cf. Jer 4:28; Mic 3:6; Joel 2:10; Sym even translates *skotasmōs* "a being dark, darkness"), and this the pun loving poet of the Song would not have missed.

- 13 So, for example, M. V. Fox 1985, 101.

- 14 Fox is correct to emphasize that biblical Hebrew has the capability of overdetermining one sense or the other. For example, an emphatic *and* could be signaled by *wēgam*, *wēʾap* or the like (M. V. Fox 1985, 101). But many (most?) contexts are not so syntactically explicit.

which translates: *ʾwkmʾ nʾwyʾyʾ nʾ* lit. “black am I and beautiful am I.”¹⁵ And, as Cixous’s emphatic *and* shows, such a reading is just as capable of capturing the line’s defiant tone and even better expresses the young woman’s unreserved affirmation of her blackness. The image may be read as a prefiguration of Cixous’s laughing Medusa that is equally resistant of normative assumptions about the female body.¹⁶

In appropriating the line, Cixous clearly expands its scope, both in terms of voice (“we”) and content (encompassing issues beyond beauty, such as gender, sexuality, and race). Yet these expansions are very much in the spirit of the original Hebrew text. There can be little doubt that the voice of the young woman that we hear in the Song, which is raised here so defiantly (though playfully, see below) against one set of cultural prejudices, were it recontextualized (as it is in Cixous’s reading), would similarly sing out against other prejudices. In fact, one may even argue, following Ellen Zertal Lambert, that insofar as beauty “on the outside is intimately bound up with who one is on the inside” and touches on every aspect of our embodied lives.¹⁷ Therefore, the extension of the young woman’s voice to question other cultural wrongs committed against our embodied selves—patriarchy and misogyny (Cixous), anti-Semitism and genocide (Celan)—is even embedded thematically within the biblical text.¹⁸ But this begins to move well away from the point I want to make here, namely: that Cixous uses the language of blackness in Song 1:5 to counter and redeem the language of darkness she inherits from the psychoanalytic discourse of Freud.

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It is not too surprising that Cixous read the Song and even appropriated some of its language.¹⁹ More intriguing is the insight that this gives about the Song’s

15 All translations mine except where otherwise indicated. The LXX, *melana eimi kai kalē*, is itself more equivocal. But note the rendering of NETS, “I am black and beautiful,” which renders the conjunction *kai* most literally as “and.”

16 Perhaps even more famous in the Song is the first description song of the woman (4:1–7) in which her flowing dark hair is compared to a “flock of goats” winding down a distant mountainside, her neck is imagined as city’s defensive tower hung with a necklace of war shields, and her breasts are likened to “twins of a gazelle.” The resulting image is more than a match for Cixous’s laughing Medusa, though, significantly, it is presented as the product of a loving male gaze. Cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp 2005a.

17 As cited in W. Steiner 2001, 218.

18 Cf. Christopher King 2000, 128–30.

19 Cf. Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, 61, 97.

larger sensibilities, namely: that in intriguing ways the Song realizes the kind of *écriture féminine*—"feminine writing"—that Cixous calls for in "Sorties" (and also in "The Laugh of the Medusa"). Cixous herself acknowledges that down through the ages there have been poets (even male ones) "capable of loving love and hence capable of loving others and wanting them, of imagining the woman who would hold out against oppression and constitute herself as a superb, equal, hence, 'impossible' subject, untenable in a real social framework."²⁰ My claim is that the poets, singers, and scribes responsible for the Song are such ones. In the remarks that follow, I offer some initial thoughts toward this larger thesis, taking the poem in Song 1:5–8—the larger context out of which Cixous's "black and beautiful" language comes—as my chief textual point of reference. The line of argument pursued is both deductive and constructive in nature. The constructive element is crucial as it is only in the act of bringing Cixous into conversation with a reading of the Song that the latter's affinities with the former can be recognized. One happy consequence of this reading strategy is that it opens up interpretive pathways into the Song that are pregnant with untapped political, philosophical, and ethical possibilities and relevances. For Cixous, writing and reading are always inherently political acts, capable of questioning cultural and social practices, staging crises, inventing new possibilities. "If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where *it* writes itself, where *it* dreams, where *it* invents new worlds." "That," exclaims Cixous, "is writing."²¹ The Song's "unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love," especially when sighted through Cixousian eyes, I argue, gives us a paradisaal "somewhere else"—a writing!—that is vital enough to matter, to transform how we relate one to another, the same and the other; gives us, that is, an *écriture féminine*.²² But first a brief overview of the little poem (or fragment of a poem?) in 1:5–8.

20 H. Cixous 1980, 249; cf. H. Cixous 1986, 98.

21 H. Cixous 1986, 72.

22 My emphasis here on the "utopian" elements in the Song is intentional. Regardless of how the Song is contextualized—historically, culturally, intellectually—its utopianism is a crucial dimension of the poetic world created in her chapter in this volume. The utopian, though sometimes misappreciated by Cixous' critics, is important to much of Cixous' writing and is often poised (and posed) for political uptake. For an appreciation of the utopic in Cixous (as well as an incisive explication of the naiveté of much early Anglo-American criticism of Cixous), see A. Aneja 1999, esp. 67–70.

1 Song 1:5–8

This poem breaks into two main sections, vv. 5–6 and vv. 7–8. The first section is composed of three couplets and a closing triplet and features the voice of the female lover, the young woman. This section opens with the young woman addressing her girlfriends (lit. “the daughters of Jerusalem”) and extolling the beauty of her sun-darkened skin: “I am black and beautiful!” (v. 5). The tone is light and playful, though, as we have already seen, not un-serious. The young woman appears to be having a bit of fun with what she knows would otherwise be taken as a negative characteristic—emboldened by the assuring knowledge that she and her blackness is loved by another (who addresses her as “most beautiful of women,” 1:8). The boast, then, is the healthy braggadocio of one newly in love and eager to share her happiness.

This sense of playfulness is underscored to good effect by the puns and wordplays that abound in this section of the poem. For example, in the very first word, *šəḥôrâ* “black,” which is to be derived etymologically from the root *šḥr* 1 “to be black, dark,” there is a possible allusion via a play on a root homograph (*šḥr* 11) meaning “to look for, search” to both the “looking” that goes on in 1:6—the girlfriends are implored not to “look down on” (*r’h*)²³ the young woman’s black skin that has been “gazed” (*šzp*) upon by the sun—and the “seeking” that is the subject of 1:7–8 (cf. Prov 7:15).²⁴ In 1:6, the young woman explains her exposure to the hot Mediterranean sun as a consequence of her brothers’ anger which prompted them to set her as a “guard” (*nôṭērâ*) in the vineyards. The Hebrew *niḥārû bî* “they were angry with me” (from *ḥrh*) may also be read as “they burned against me” (from *ḥrr*; cf. Ps 102:4), playing on the scorching look of the sun that burns the skin (cf. Heb. *ḥmm* “to be hot, warm,” Exod 16:21; *bēḥôm haššāmeš* “in the heat of the sun,” 1 Sam 11:9; cf. Neh 7:3; KAI 200.10–11).²⁵ And the section ends by playing on the literal and figurative

23 The root *r’h* in biblical Hebrew has an especially broad semantic range. One of the senses likely intended here is “to gloat over,” though usually with the preposition *b-* (Obad 12; Ps 22:18)—here the sense is inferred more from the fact that the sun always “looks down.”

24 The effect is somewhat analogous to that elicited by the play on the homonyms “son” and “sun” in the English commonplace, “my son is the light of my world.” The Syr.’s ramifying repetition of the same verbal root—“that I am black (*ʿwkmnt*) because the sun blackened me (*ʿwkmny*)”—throws the play in the biblical Hebrew text into stark relief. LXX levels in the other direction, using *blepō* and *parablepō* to focalize the seeing of the girlfriends and sun. Later in Song 6:10 the young woman is imagined as “looking forth” (*šqp*) like the “dawn” *šāḥar*, which echoes sonically (in retrospect) in the woman’s blackness, her *šəḥarḥōret*.

25 The young man later in the Song likens his lover to the “(glow, heat of the) sun” (*ḥammâ*, 6:10), surely intending to recall (echo) this early set of images.

meanings of “vineyard” in the Song. The vineyard, garden, or field is the conventional locale of lovemaking in the Song (e.g., 7:13) and throughout ancient Near Eastern love poetry. In the Song, however, the vineyard (or garden) is also used as a figure for the young woman herself (esp. 2:15; 4:12–5:1; 6:2). It is the latter on which the final line in 1:6 turns: if she was set to “guard” (*nōṭērā*) the family’s literal “vineyards” (*hakkērāmîm*), her own more figurative “vineyard” (*karmî šellî*) she has not “guarded” (*lō’ nāṭārtî*; cf. 2:15)—this last bit said, no doubt, as a happy boast, which also tells us that the poem’s initial line is in no way demurring.²⁶

The second section of the poem is comprised of two stanzas—each having a triplet and a couplet and the two together forming an inclusio (triplet:couplet::couplet:triplet)—and features the teasing banter of two lovers. The unannounced theme is the search for love that both so achingly desire but neither will admit (at least outwardly). The young woman speaks first in a mock pout,²⁷ wondering where her lover (here imagined as a shepherd) grazes his flocks that she may join him during the afternoon siesta. She begs him to tell her, lest she be forced to wander among his companions’ flocks “as one wrapped up” (*ōṭṭyâ*). Again the choice of diction is playful—the root *r’h* “to feed, graze” is used elsewhere in the Song to refer to the man’s enjoyment of sexual pleasures (6:2–3; cf. 4:16–5:1; Prov 30:20), and it does not take too keen of an imagination to pick up on the double entendre in *rbš* “to lie down”—objects for both verbs are intentionally withheld (cf. 1:8). The precise reference of the term normally glossed as “to wrap up oneself” (*ōṭṭyâ*) is uncertain.²⁸ Presumably the barb of her tease is the possibility of (flirtatious) encounters with the young man’s “companions” (cf. 2:15). The young man stands his ground, replying that if she

26 Ongoing upkeep of orchards and vineyards would have been allocated across gender and age lines and could well have involved the older children in the family, boys and girls (Carol Meyers 1997, 24; cf. Carey Ellen Walsh 2000b, 59–63). Such tending would have been sporadic and included watering, hoeing and weeding, and guarding against outside predators (cf. 2:15; Isa 27:2–5; one Akkadian text even talks about the need to “guard” the fields from the wild “gazelle” [YOS 7 156:20]).

27 The first two lines of the opening triplet mime the unbalanced rhythm of the so-called *qinah* meter (long line followed by short line) that typifies many biblical laments and funeral dirges. Also the initial word of the second and third lines, *’ekā*, which here means “where?” as in Aramaic (Tg. pointedly reads against this sense, using *’ykādyn* “how”; cf. Syr. *’ykn*), plays on its more normal sense in biblical Hebrew, “alas!” again as in laments and funeral dirges (e.g., Lam 1:1).

28 The basic meaning of the root “to cover” is well established (e.g. 1 Sam 28:14; Ps 109:19; Sir 50:11). What is not clear here is what the “covering” implies.

truly does not know—and of course he implies that she *does* know²⁹—then she should go right ahead and graze (*rēʾī*) her kids (*gēdīyyōtayik*) among his companions' flocks. She, too, is here imagined as a shepherdess, but "kids" may be intended here to refer as well more figuratively to the young woman's breasts, as with the "gazelles" and "fawns" in 4:5 and 7:3—the young man thus turning over (unwrapping) her teasing threat of attracting other lovers.

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From the start Cixous refrains from defining *écriture féminine* too closely: "It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded."³⁰ Indeed, an openness to difference and to the unknown is at the very heart of how Cixous sees and engages the world, and thus the last thing she wants is to close off prematurely any unforeseen possibilities for "an/other writing."³¹ And yet, as she continues, this hesitancy to define "doesn't mean" that a feminine writing "doesn't exist." It most certainly does. And as I. Blyth and S. Sellers have seen, though Cixous stops short of offering a restrictive definition of *écriture féminine*, she does nonetheless "give various hints and suggestions about the nature of *écriture féminine*."³² I take up several of these "hints and suggestions" as a way of measuring (some of) the Song's Cixousian affinities.

2 In the Affirmative

Cixous writes in the affirmative. She asserts life: "What is feminine (the poets suspected it) affirms: ... and yes I said yes I will Yes, says Molly (in her rapture), carrying *Ulysses* with her in the direction of a new writing; I said yes, I will Yes."³³ This "yes" does not ignore death, as Cixous acknowledges, "We live, we write starting from death." And death obviously has a future for Cixous. "But," she says, and this is the crucial bit, "I am not expecting death.... For me..., if

29 Indeed, the first couplet in 1:8 may be construed to say as much, taking the initial *'im-lō'* as a particle of asseveration, "surely," as it is sometimes used in biblical Hebrew (1 Kgs 20:23; 2 Kgs 9:26; Isa 5:9; Jer 15:11; Ezek 3:6; 34:8; Job 1:11; cf. GKC §149a—d; Joüon §165a—i; IBHS §40.2.2a—b): "Surely (*'im-lō'*) you know, O most beautiful of women...."

30 H. Cixous 1980, 253.

31 The phrase is S. Sellers' (ultra) concise gloss of Cixous's *écriture féminine* (1996, xi).

32 I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 19.

33 H. Cixous 1986, 85; see more generally on this theme, Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, 11–12; A. Bray 2004, 67–70.

there was a first end, a 'beginning,' it was a yes, a smile, two recognizing each other. Me: life flows towards life. Between life and life there is an unknown passage."³⁴ This affirmative nod towards life not only shapes the themes and topics that routinely appear in Cixous's writing, but it infects the very way she writes, her tone, the enlivening electricity that courses through her diction and syntax. Her wordplay and many puns, convoluted syntax, unconventional use of capitalization, privileging of nonlinear ways of thinking, all bring life to the reading experience, inscribe the very vitality by which she means to counter death (by leaving no space for it) and "to win grace."³⁵ The poetical is always foregrounded, a reveling in the very materiality of language. And the logic of lyric pervades all of her writings.³⁶ The affirmative also, finally, characterizes the habitual angle at which so many of Cixous's texts are pitched, as constructive interventions in critical thinking—"writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*."³⁷

The Song is the Bible's foremost inscription of an abundant and fully lived life. This is thematized most explicitly in two of the Song's more memorable lines, "Eat, O friends, drink / and be(come) drunk with love(making)!" (5:1) and "for love, like death, is strong!" (8:6)—indeed, this last line epitomizes the Cixousian counterpose of love in the face of death. In our poem, the same embrace of life (wherever it may be found) animates the young woman's opening exclamation, "I am black and/but beautiful" (1:5), and inspires her exploration of the "tracks of the sheep" in 1:8—the "unknown passage" between "life" (hers) and "life" (his). The image of a lush and verdant vineyard (or garden), which appears here (1:6) for the first time in the Song and shimmers brilliantly against both the black backdrop of the poem's early verses (1:5–6) and the dusty brown tracks habitually traveled by Mediterranean shepherds and featured in the later lines (1:7–8), is one of the Near East's most potent symbols of life. In the Song's rendition it also means to reclaim for human habitation the lost paradise of the Bible's primordial garden, Eden³⁸—and thus the Song is in a very real way the original story of paradise regained, a quintessential

34 H. Cixous and M. Calle-Gruber 1997, 82.

35 H. Cixous 1991, 3.

36 Cf. On the importance of the poetic in Cixous, see C. MacGillivray, "Introduction: 'The Political Is—(and the) Poetical'" in H. Cixous 1994; A. Aneja, 1999, 64–65; B. M. Kaiser 2018.

37 H. Cixous 1980, 249. Cf. R. Braidotti's preference for "affirmative" as a descriptor of the political ambitions she holds for her own work (2013, esp. 54).

38 The allusions to the Genesis garden story in the Song are patent. For example, in our poem, the lover herself is "set" Adam-like to work the vineyards (1:6; cf. Gen 2:8) and in 7:11 the curse of Eve ("your desire [tēšūqātēk] shall be for your husband," Gen 3:16) is rewritten: "and upon me is his desire (tēšūqātō)." More generally, see Phyllis Trible 1978, 144–65.

Cixousian theme.³⁹ But as with Cixous this poem's affirmation of life is given as eloquently and as effectively in its light and playful tone (the zealous boasts and teasing flirtations of those newly in love) and the play of its language (puns, sound/word play). It is in and through such lyric gestures that poetry "opts for the condition of overlife," as S. Heaney says.⁴⁰ Both Cixous and the Song raise their voices to sing of a life brimming with possibility and happiness. Cixous's poetic writing, which defies neat categorizations, offers a mode of "commentary" that shares much with the poetry of the Song.⁴¹

3 A New Born Woman

"Sorties" and "Medusa" are addressed firstly to women, "I write this as a woman, toward women,"⁴² and are articulated as a call for a new kind of woman: "It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know her—by loving her for getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be...."⁴³ I want to suggest that in the young woman, whose voice is dominant in our poem and throughout the Song, we meet one who has gone "out ahead of what the New Woman will be." She has many of the qualities and characteristics that Cixous admires in the "heroes" and "heroines" of her "grandmother texts" (e.g., the Bible, Gilgamesh, Homer, Shakespeare, Kafka, the German Romantics, Kleist, Clarice Lispector). So, for example, like Saul, David, and above all Hercules ("because he did not put his muscles to work for death"), the young woman of the Song has a rebellious and even warlike bent to her. Her rebellious nature ("where distinctions of races, classes, and origins would not be put to use without someone's rebelling")⁴⁴

39 Cf. S. Sellers 1996, 63–64.

40 S. Heaney 1995, 158. Lyric verse as in the Song depends vitally on non-semantic features—form, sound, rhythm, image, wordplay, and the like—as bearers of meaning. Interestingly, Cixous herself is a highly lyrical writer ("I must confess that I put the accent on poetic," in Verena Andermatt Conley 1991, 139), self-consciously eschewing many of the standard conventions of narrative or scientific discourse (most apparent in "Sorties" which is paired with C. Clément's more traditionally written "The Guilty One" in H. Cixous 1986). And while it is not necessary to think that all "feminine writing" need emulate Cixous's lyrical style (see C. Clément's opening comments to this effect in "Exchange," also included in H. Cixous 1986, 136–37), Cixous shows well the benefits of such a style and in the process teaches readers how to read other lyrical compositions, such as the Song.

41 Cf. H. Cixous 2008, 40–41.

42 H. Cixous 1980, 245.

43 H. Cixous 1980, 248.

44 H. Cixous 1986, 72.

is made clear already in 1:5 where she speaks out against (however playfully) those who would denigrate her darkened beauty. More intriguing, the young woman is frequently figured through militaristic metaphors⁴⁵—a necklace of shields and warrior's bucklers (4:4), eyes that terrify (6:5), breasts like guard towers (8:10)—lending her the kind of “other bisexuality” admired and enjoyed by Cixous, a bisexuality unaware of limits and prohibitions—“that is to say the presence within oneself of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex.”⁴⁶ Like Achilles, the young woman is the very definition of passion (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!,” 1:2), and she is crafty like the wily Ulysses (e.g., disguising herself in order to find her lover, 1:7); she is also the anti-Ulysses—Ariadne is Cixous’s example—who gives “without calculating, without hesitating ... renouncing all security—spending without a return.”⁴⁷ This latter characteristic is hinted at in 1:7–8, but is realized most fully in the searches of 3:1–5 and 5:2–8. The young woman is full of energy and confidence (Joan of Arc) and nowhere exhibits the passivity of a victim but only the generous passivity that opens onto an other’s agency (“take me after you,” 1:4). In short, in the young woman, as she seizes “the occasion to *speak*” in the Song and sings her love song (“first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman”), we have the “shattering entry into history” of “a whole and living woman,” one into whom even Cixous might “dare” to slip (if only for a moment).⁴⁸

4 (Writing) the Body

“Woman must write her body,” says Cixous midway through “Sorties.”⁴⁹ Her entire project means to oppose an alternative way of writing (thinking)—“an/other writing” as S. Sellers aptly glosses it⁵⁰—to the masculinist (phallogocentric) discourse that otherwise has dominated and shaped Western critical thought. This “other writing” begins with the body. After all, “we are sentient

45 See Carol Meyers 1986.

46 H. Cixous 1986, 85. It is precisely this “bisexuality” that allows Cixous to freely and enjoyably impersonate her male literary heroes, cf. p. 73.

47 H. Cixous 1986, 75.

48 See H. Cixous 1980, 250–51; H. Cixous 1986, 77, 79.

49 H. Cixous 1986, 94.

50 Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, xi.

beings,” notes Cixous⁵¹—beings, that is, whose every interaction with the world beyond our skin is mediated *through* our skin. Historically, however, the body has been mostly neglected in the West, given the mind/body dualism that pervades its philosophical tradition(s). And it is woman, being “more body than man is,” contends Cixous,⁵² that has suffered more adversely from this dichotomous way of thinking: “We have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them to a stupid modesty; we’ve been tricked into a fool’s bargain.”⁵³ Therefore, Cixous’s charge to write the body means to underscore and to celebrate human embodiment and to urge women (and men!) to allow their bodies to inform their ideas and thinking (e.g., it is central to such key Cixousian notions as sexual difference, feminine libidinal economy, and the gift), to “pay attention to all the nonverbal, unconscious, instinctual drives and sensations” of the body.⁵⁴ Indeed, to write from female bodily experience for Cixous is nothing short of recreating the world.

The Song presents us with just such “an/other” world, one where the healthy celebration of the human body and an embodied sexuality is thoroughgoing and plain for all to see. The language of these poems frequently means to evoke and to open onto the various bodily senses—smell, touch, taste, sound, sight. And there is even a quite literal (if still highly figured) writing of the young woman’s body in 1:6 (“my *vineyard* I did not tend”) and it is most definitely not tied to “a stupid modesty.”⁵⁵ Far from it, in fact. On this topic ancient Near Eastern conceptions of humanity were thoroughly holistic; no mind/body split here. This is important for readers of the Song (and other biblical literature) to keep in mind as there is a tendency, especially when reading in translation, to over-spiritualize. So when we encounter, for example, even such a seemingly straightforward phrase in English translation as “you whom my soul loves” (*še’āhābā napšī*) in 1:7, we would do well to read as if Cixous were looking over our shoulder and exhorting us not to be “tricked.” Both of the Hebrew terms

51 Cixous exemplifies what she means here with love, which she says “begins with a burning in the chest” and is only named “love” after the fact (H. Cixous and C. Calle-Gruber 1997, 18).

52 H. Cixous 1986, 94, 95.

53 H. Cixous 1986, 94.

54 I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 33.

55 More typical examples abound: “My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh / that lies between my breasts” (1:13); “As an apple tree.... / so is my beloved.... / I delight to sit in his shade, / and his fruit is sweet to my palate” (2:3); “you have ravished my heart with but a glance of your eyes” (4:9); “This height of yours is like a palm tree, / and your breasts like clusters. / I tell myself that I will climb the palm tree / and lay hold of its branches, / but rather were your breasts / (instead) like clusters of the vine!” (7:8–9).

used here are far more holistic than are their English glosses—especially when the latter (“soul” and “love”) are joined together. The root *’hb* “to love” (both verbally and nominally) does focus a pronounced sense of emotional or affective attachment,⁵⁶ but it remains nonetheless a strongly holistic concept in Hebrew, inclusive of more specifically physical (i.e., lovemaking) shades of meaning (esp. 2:4; cf. Jer 2:33; Hos 3:1; Prov 5:19).⁵⁷ And the semantic field of Hebrew *nepeš* is especially broad—“maw, throat, gullet; desire, appetite; vital self; life; living being, person.” And while there are occasions where “soul,” in its vaguest and most naive sense, is an appropriate gloss for *nepeš*, they are relatively few.⁵⁸ Here that translation is more deceptive than not, capturing something of the deep-seated vitality of the young woman’s love, but missing its (assumed) holism and the strong accent in the line on erotic desire (see esp. 3:1–4; cf. Gen 34:3, 8; Ezek 23:17, 22, 28), not to mention the term’s very common usage as a self-reflexive particle (often standing in for the personal pronoun “I”). So a more fitting (if overly prosaic) gloss would be something like “you whom I cherish and want with every bit of me,” though spoken with the plain simplicity of “you whom I love.” But the main point I want to stress with this brief excursus on translation is that here the Song and Cixous are thinking along very similar lines and that the image of wholeness projected through the figure of the young woman anticipates and is compatible with the mind/body holism extolled by Cixous. And as crucial, she is the product of verbal art that (eventually) gets written down; that is, she is the literal writing of one (historically/culturally) particular woman’s body.

5 Motherhood

One of the more persistent themes running throughout Cixous’s writing is a strong (re)valorization of motherhood.⁵⁹ Already in “Medusa” she writes: “In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes.”⁶⁰ As with much else in

56 Cf. J. Lapsley 2003.

57 In 2:5, for example, the metaphor of the love-sick girl who must be put to bed trades precisely on the physicality of Hebrew *’ahābā*—the bed being a place to lie down when sick or when making love.

58 As H. Seebass (2003, 509) recognizes, the accent with *nepeš* is generally on an abiding and holistic vitality, “a defiant affirmation of life.”

59 Recently, for example, see H. Cixous 2014.

60 H. Cixous 1980, 252.

Cixous the theme is rooted in the body and in her autobiography. She is keen to create space for women to choose to have a child if they so desire: “Either you want a kid or you don’t—*that’s your business*” and “We are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy.”⁶¹ She also means to tap motherhood as a symbolic source for thinking—“the mother, too, is a metaphor.”⁶² Her notion of the “gift” is a case in point. She counters Mauss’s idea of gift as exchange (“to give, to receive, to reciprocate”)—what Cixous describes disparagingly as the “gift-that-takes”⁶³—with a notion of gift that does not involve a loss of self or an implicit demand for a return and instead is predicated on a giving that creates a place for the other to live autonomously and in relationship. She finds warrant for such a conception in a woman’s bodily experience of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. For example, in pregnancy, writes Cixous, “women ... have an experience of the inside, an experience of the capacity for the other, and an experience of nonnegative change brought about by the other of positive receptivity.”⁶⁴ And again in “Sorties”: “It is not only a question of the feminine body’s extra resource, this specific power to produce some thing living of which her flesh is the locus ..., but also of the irreplaceable experience of those moments of stress, of the body’s crises, of that work that goes on peacefully for a long time only to burst out in that surpassing moment, the time of childbirth. ... It is also the experience of a ‘bond’ with the other ... the not-me within me. ...”⁶⁵ “Women know how to live detachment,” says Cixous, “giving birth is neither losing or increasing. It’s adding to life an other.” And thus woman/mother is literally and figuratively “the locus for the other”⁶⁶ and the very conceptualization of humanity. Cixous underscores the latter with reference to her own mother, Eve Cixous, “my-mother-the-life,” who was “named Life at her birth.”⁶⁷ Here Cixous is playing on Gen 3:20 where Adam names his wife, *ḥawwā* “Eve” (after the Vg.’s Hava) or more literally “Life” (LXX *zōē*), “because she was the

61 H. Cixous 1980, 261.

62 H. Cixous 1980, 252. Aneja emphasizes this metaphoricity and its “plurimodal manifestations” in Cixous’s writing to counter the want of some to reify or literalize the image (A. Aneja 1999, 65–66). Here is a good example of the work Cixous’s intentionally “slippery” language does. The metaphor is available to all regardless of gender or sexual identity—even the distinctly masculine God of the Hebrew Bible may be metaphorized as a mother, viz. “you forgot the God who birthed you” (Deut 32:18).

63 H. Cixous 1980, 259.

64 “The Author in Truth” in H. Cixous 1991, 155.

65 H. Cixous 1986, 90.

66 H. Cixous 1980, 261, 252.

67 H. Cixous 2011 at 283—Eve features prominently in Cixous’s writings from the last twenty or so years in particular.

mother of all living (*hāy*)”—the Bible’s primordial image of woman and the etiological foundation of all humanity.

On first hearing, to sound the tune of motherhood in the context of the Song sounds a bit off-key. This topic is nowhere thematized as such. In fact, one of the still liberating aspects of the Song—given the Bible’s continued cultural relevance—is the fact that its celebration of love and human sensuality is articulated without specific reference to marriage or parenthood.⁶⁸ Still, there are a number of oblique references to the young woman’s own mother in the Song (1:6; 3:4; 6:9; 8:1, 2, 5; cf. 3:11) that put motherhood textually before readers.⁶⁹ The first of these occurs in our poem (1:6), where the young woman identifies the literal “sons of my mother” (*bēnî ‘immî*) as those responsible for setting her to watch and tend the vineyards. This phrase literally identifies brothers of the same mother in families where a man has more than one wife (e.g., Gen 43:29; Deut 13:7; Judg 8:19).⁷⁰ At the same time it may be used as a synonym for the more usual *‘aḥîm* “brothers”—especially in parallelistic verse (e.g., Gen 27:29; Ps 50:20). However, in the absence of parallelism and the lack (in the larger poetic context) of any apparent rationale for the kinship specificity otherwise denoted by the phrase, its presence in 1:6 calls attention to itself. As the Song’s other furtive mentions of the young woman’s mother accumulate, especially the two references to the “house of my mother” (3:4; 8:2), the uniqueness of which (elsewhere only in Gen 24:28 and Ruth 1:8) strongly implies an intended allusion to and swerve away from the otherwise ubiquitous designation of the family home and household, the “house of the father,”⁷¹ the poetry’s mother-spiced diction begins to seem less accidental, flavoring the Song with an awareness of a social reality in which “women were powerful actors in daily affairs and family decisions.”⁷²

In the traditional societies of the ancient Mediterranean most women would have anticipated becoming mothers. In fact, as much as a third of their typical life spans (ca. thirty years on average) would have been involved in the physical processes of motherhood—pregnancy, breastfeeding, taking care of infants. Thus, what one notices as a slippage in Cixous’s writing, her oftentimes

68 Though not a few commentators have felt the need to read these topics into the Song.

69 Not to mention that in the ancient world outside of the idyllic garden of love in the Song (a world to which our lovers must ultimately return: “Flee, my beloved!” 8:14) a woman would traditionally anticipate becoming a mother (and a man a father).

70 With the exception of some elites (e.g., royalty, the wealthy) such a practice would have been rare in the ancient Levant during most periods, the popularity of such family structures in literary portrayals notwithstanding.

71 See especially Carol Meyers 1991. Cf. Cynthia R. Chapman 2016.

72 Carol Meyers 1997, 34.

interchangeable use of the two terms “woman” and “mother;”⁷³ was often quite literally the case in the biblical world: women *were* mothers. And the role of these mothers/women in the production system of the characteristic self-sufficient family household that was the backbone of ancient Levantine agrarian-based economy was every bit as important as the males’:

Women participated in agricultural tasks, were responsible for processing the crops into comestibles, made most of the clothing and probably also the baskets and the ceramic vessels, managed the activities of children and grandchildren (and of servants, hired workers, sojourners, if present), to say nothing of their role as progenitors.⁷⁴

Such activities were technologically sophisticated (often more so than the males’) and accounted for a substantial and significant part of the household’s economic life. And as C. Meyers further stresses, this productivity, in contrast, for example, to contemporary Western experience, was largely unaffected by a woman’s maternal activities: “Production and reproduction in agrarian Israel were not experienced as such distinct or competing categories of female experience as they are in the industrialized world.”⁷⁵

73 The slippage is intentional and ought not be reified. Cixous’s use of the maternal metaphor is loose and pluralistic:

“There are thousands of ways of living one’s pregnancy; to have or not to have with the still invisible other a relationship of another intensity. And if you don’t have that particular yearning, it doesn’t mean that you’re in any way lacking. Each body distributes in its own special way, without model or norm, the nonfinite and changing totality of its desires” (H. Cixous 1980, 262).

74 Carol Meyers 1991, 42. No one has done more than C. Meyers to elucidate the daily lives of women in ancient Israel and Judah. For more detailed accounts, see Carol Meyers 1997 and especially Meyers 1988. Most of Meyers’s own research has focused on the Iron Age, especially the Iron I period. That her reconstruction is broadly applicable to the domestic life of at least certain segments of the later Persian Period population, such as in the more rural settings featured as the backdrop for much of the poetry in the Song (cf. Carol Meyers 1986, 219), is likely given the highly conservative nature of the kinship culture of the Eastern Mediterranean (cf. Cynthia R. Chapman 2016). In fact, as E. Stern notes, manifold continuities in material culture (e.g., “open court” houses, Intermediate type burial chambers, domestic pottery) are exhibited between pre-exilic Israel and especially the mountainous regions of Judea, Transjordan, and to a lesser extent Samaria during the Persian Period (see most conveniently Ephraim Stern 1984). For a portrait of a more well-to-do and urbane woman of the Persian period, see Prov 31:10–31 and the socioeconomic reading of that poem by C. R. Yoder (2001, 2003).

75 Carol Meyers 1997, 28.

Therefore, if no ancient woman could realistically aspire to Cixous's admonitions about taking or leaving motherhood, whatever she fancies,⁷⁶ neither would she attach to motherhood and a mother's domestic work the same kind of negative stigma as do so many women in the post-industrial West wanting to find a place in a work-world outside the home.⁷⁷ These ancient mothers dominated their world and were much esteemed ("Honor your father and your mother," Exod 20:12; cf. Deborah's honorific, "mother in Israel," Judg 5:7), and thus we should not be surprised at the high admiration that informs the sideways glances our poet pays to the young woman's mother. Indeed, when properly sighted, the young woman's mother shown in these glances and the world they open onto, like the young woman herself, projects a most compelling image of "a whole and living woman," a "traditional mom" whose daily contribution to the household's common life (economic and otherwise) is considerable and throughout marked by equity and complementarity with that of her husband (and other members of the household)—nothing much like the image so often projected by the "Family Values" crowd.

6 Love and Laughter

Any engagement with Cixous requires at least a passing glance at the theme of love (and especially romantic love). It is a central concern in much of Cixous's writing.⁷⁸ Love is a concept rich in qualities worthy of esteem and valorization and integral on many accounts to a flourishing human life. But for Cixous love is above all an opening to the other,⁷⁹ which, she says, is everything: "there's nothing without the other."⁸⁰ It "is about receiving the strangeness of the other without being threatened by the difference; it is about a fidelity to the other, the passion of wonder, an openness to the unknown, the unthought."⁸¹ But most importantly it is all this while also wanting "the two, as well as the both, the ensemble of one and the other," an ensemble that honors the self as well

76 The revolutionary force of Cixous's valorization of motherhood for feminism (especially of the mid 1970s) should not be overlooked, see F. Pontuale 1996–1997.

77 This latter perspective, as Carol Meyers (1997, 24) well observes, emerges only after the "splitting of workplace (and paid labor) from home (and unpaid labor)" that accompanied the industrial revolution.

78 Cf. S. Renshaw 2013.

79 By contrast, Emmanuel Levinas's lifelong exploration of the ethical relationship with the other makes very little conceptual use of love. He once said, "I don't very much like the word love, which is worn-out and debased" (Emmanuel Levinas 1998b, 103).

80 I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 104.

81 I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 75.

as the other. It is a relationship of two beings and the “third body” they create in their exchanges “in-between.” The “relationship between beings that alone merits the name of love,” writes Cixous, involves real exchange, “a recognition of each other,” “the intense and passionate work of knowing,” each taking “the risk of other, of difference, without feeling threatened by the existence of an otherness,” and each “delighting to increase through the unknown that is there to discover, to respect, to favor, to cherish.”⁸² As Bray notices, there is a tendency in much post-structural thought to imagine the other as an idealized horizon empty of particular historical and social content.⁸³ Cixous’s privileging of the love relationship as the premier locale for encountering the other offers a powerful corrective to this tendency. Not only does the other become imaginable as a real, flesh-and-bone individual, but by attending to the agency and reality of the self (as well as that of the other), Cixous imagines a way of encountering otherness that respects difference and makes space for *both* subjects in the relationship: “The loving to be other, another, without it necessarily going the route of abasing what is the same, herself.”⁸⁴

Such a thinking of the other (ethics) through love has obvious appeal for any critically engaged reading of the Song, the West’s primordial lyric celebration of romantic love between two people. In 1:5–8, love as such is not really topicalized, though it does provide the backdrop against which the poem demands to be read. This is especially evident in 1:7–8. Here we overhear the two lovers teasing one another—nicely counterpointing the gossip of girlfriends in 1:5–6. Mutuality (of an asymmetrical variety where difference is respected) is one of the hallmarks of the Cixousian loving relationship and it is what so distinguishes the Song’s portraiture of love more generally.⁸⁵ Here the mutuality is made manifest not in what is said but in the way of the saying, in the poem’s form of discourse, dialogue. Conversation, “speaking to” and as Cixous so often stresses “listening,” is the mode (*par excellence*) of ethical discourse, a linguistic gesture through which life, respect and otherness is imputed to an other and the possibility for real exchange is created.⁸⁶ The Song’s use of dialogue⁸⁷ (here in the lovers’ trade of teasing barbs), then, carries with it ethical

82 H. Cixous 1986, 78.

83 I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 76.

84 H. Cixous 1986, 86.

85 M. V. Fox 1985, 304f.

86 Cf. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp 2004, 54–56.

87 Not at all a stylistic given. Compare, for example, the Egyptian love songs, which do not use real dialogue (M. V. Fox 1985, 259–65; on the significance of style more generally, see N. Goodman 1978, 23–40).

implications and contributes significantly to what shapes the Song into a genuine “duet.”⁸⁸

In 1:7–8 we also glimpse the young woman’s willingness to risk for the other—later in the sequence the risk will be paid with a very real beating (5:7).⁸⁹ But the aspect of love I want to accent is its delight, its laughter, its need at times to be utterly frivolous and so unnecessary. There is much to admire in Cixous’s contribution to feminism and to critical thinking more generally. However, one aspect that is easily overlooked but absolutely vital to how she sees the world and why, I suspect, that love features so prominently in her thinking is her allowance for superabundance, uselessness, and waste.⁹⁰ Laughter (literally and figuratively) and play (linguistic and otherwise) fill the pages of her texts. Life is not always serious, even for one, who, like Cixous, is only too aware of her “luck,” of her “being born in Algeria” and a little too late, or else, she says, “I would anonymiserate eternally from Auschwitz.”⁹¹ The talk we overhear in 1:7–8 is in the end very silly, the teasing chitchat of two young lovers—perhaps they are sitting alone together somewhere under a tree, passing the lazy afternoon hours—and thus easily dismissed. And yet, Cixous reminds us, we very much need such times of silliness and frivolity, “taking the time a phrase or thought needs to make oneself loved, to make oneself reverberate.”⁹² The Song is filled with figured laughter, delight, happiness—we should expect nothing less of paradise in a garden of love and we should cherish and nourish their presence in our own lives.

Finally, I note the great variety of loving couples who populate Cixous’s writings—licit, illicit; heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual; living women and men all—as a reminder that the Song is but one instantiation of love’s story. Its celebration of a particular love between one man and one woman ought not to be read as a singular definition of love good for all time, but instead should open us up to the wonder and good of love wherever, whenever, and among whom-ever it may be found. And in a time of climate decline and species extinction the crucial need for such loving across (and among) bodies to be inclusive of and attentive to the non-human other deserves notice. Non-human animals in

88 “I love dialogue,” writes Cixous in her notebooks, “—work, dance, grasping, rectification, repentirs, misunderstandings—(portrait of dialogues)—assault and battery—duet” (H. Cixous and M. Calle-Gruber 1997, 17).

89 Note that this is itself not a part of the poem’s denotational content, but rather is a connotation (implication) that we draw from the young woman’s stated willingness to “become like one covered up” and her lover’s instruction to her to “go forth” if she so dares.

90 H. Cixous 1986, 93.

91 H. Cixous 1986, 71.

92 H. Cixous 1986, 93.

particular figure prominently in Cixous's writings, especially more recently.⁹³ In fact, the mythic Medusa, which Cixous describes as a "strange animal" (*animale*),⁹⁴ problematizes the presumed priority and normativity of the human. And this decentering of the human is further emphasized by her play on the French homonym *méduse* "jellyfish" in Cixous's reframing of "Medusa" for twenty-first-century readers.⁹⁵ Animals and natural landscapes also populate the poetry of the Song.⁹⁶ In our poem, for example, love of the human other (viz. the young woman for the young man and the young man for the young woman) is filtered through and enmeshed with love of—care for (lit. "to keep, guard, watch," Heb. *nṭr*; "to feed," Heb. *r'h*; "to bed down," Heb. *rbš*)—vineyard (1:6) and sheep and goats (1:7–8). It is time, remarks Cixous while reintroducing "Medusa," for the Medusa (*cum méduse*) to "fly" again because "the air is full of algae" and we are "suffocating" and "do not laugh much."⁹⁷

7 *L'écriture féminine*

There is much more to say about Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, even with regard to the small poem in Song 1:5–8. But the few themes (affirmative stance toward life, New Woman, embodiment, motherhood, love and laughter) herein explored may suffice to give a sense ("hints and suggestions") of what Cixous means by *écriture féminine* and of how the Song achieves a version of this "feminine writing." Both of the major senses attached by Cixous to the adjective "feminine" in her ever fluctuating usage aptly characterize the Song as feminine (then and now). First, and most transparently, the term feminine isolates the sex-specific experiences of being a woman—biological, libidinal, imaginary. Cixous writes "toward women" "as a woman." Indeed, "being a woman" is primary and, as she says, "determines me absolutely."⁹⁸ And thus, at one level a feminine writing is a writing of, about, for women. If there is any book of the Bible that qualifies as feminine in this sense it is the Song of Songs. It is the voice of a woman that dominates this poetic sequence. She literally has the most lines and it is her voice that both opens and closes the sequence and that auditors find the most compelling. The language of the

93 E.g., "Stigmata, or Job the dog"; H. Cixous 2010a, esp. 141–80. Cf. H. Anderson 2017, 420–36; C. Gerhardt 2017, 75; R. K. Bostow 2019; R. Braidotti 2013, chs. 2–3.

94 H. Cixous, 2010, 23–33, 30.

95 H. Cixous 2012, 37–74, 38; H. Cixous 2015, 133–56, 143–44.

96 Esp. Elaine T. James 2017a.

97 H. Cixous 2010b, 33.

98 As quoted in L. K. Penrod 1996, 5.

Song flaunts another version of femininity as grammatically feminine forms abound as nowhere else in the Bible. The variety of sexuality most prominently on display throughout the sequence also may be described historically and culturally as feminine—non-teleological, a diffuse *jouissance*, evocative, passionate, innocent, interested in interior feelings and relationships.⁹⁹ And some have even speculated that the Song was authored by a woman.¹⁰⁰ Short of possessing signed autographs or reliable historical observations, however, it remains beyond our abilities to accurately discern the biological sex of actual authors from linguistic and literary cues alone.¹⁰¹ Still, the question is worth pausing over, even if we know that most of the scribes in antiquity were male. The reality of sexual difference, Cixous would say, is always poised to implicate itself materially, imaginatively, textually. Besides, history's earliest attribution of authorship in fact is made on behalf of a woman, Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2300 BCE) and priestess of the moon god at Ur.¹⁰²

If always rooted in anatomical or biological sex (or "sexual difference"), the term feminine (and its various substitutes) also and ultimately signifies for Cixous a different approach to the other, a way of "keeping alive the other" that opposes patriarchy—or as she calls it, "phallo(go)centrism," the only intellectual economy history has yet produced.¹⁰³ That is, the word feminine ultimately carries for Cixous larger ideological connotations. As such, it is a qualifier of sexual difference applicable to women *and* men. In fact, she makes a point of using masculine and feminine so as "to avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are some men who do not repress their femininity, some women who, more or less strongly, inscribe their masculinity. Difference is not distributed, of course, on the basis of socially determined 'sexes.'"¹⁰⁴ This hardly seems like the thinking of an "essentialist." The charge of "essentialism" made by Anglophone feminists against Cixous appears to me to be more the

99 See J. S. Cooper 1989; J. S. Cooper 1997; G. Leick 1994, 21, 58.

100 E.g. S. D. Goitein 1988.

101 Thus, Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes are justified in moving away from such questions and toward looking for gendered representations in the texts, e.g., male or female voices (1993) esp. 6.

102 William W. Hallo and J. van Dijk 1968, 189f. Authorship in antiquity did not presume scribal training or capabilities.

103 H. Cixous 1980, 249; H. Cixous 1986, 79, 81, 83, 86.

104 H. Cixous 1986, 81. And similarly in an interview (from 1984): "My own position is to insist always on the fact that libidinal femininity is not the *propre* of women and that libidinal masculinity is not the *propre* of men. What is most important for me, what allows me to continue to live and not to despair, is precisely the conviction that it does not depend on the anatomical sex, not on the role of man and of woman but that it depends on life's chance which is every individual's responsibility" (Verena Andermatt Conley 1991, 132).

product of ignorance than anything else. Even the most cursory of readings of Cixous shows her anything but an essentialist thinker.¹⁰⁵ As for the specific words “feminine” and “masculine,” they are themselves merely a product of history (“We are born into language,”¹⁰⁶ and thus not surprisingly for Cixous the basic content of what they mean reflects the way these positions tend currently under patriarchy). But ultimately Cixous does not want to get hung up on the historical origins of these terms. She even can “imagine” a time when “what today appears to be ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ would no longer amount to the same thing. No longer would the common logic of difference be organized with the opposition that remains dominant. Difference would be a bunch of new differences.”¹⁰⁷ Consequently, Cixous speaks of a bisexuality (an “other bisexuality”) that is available to women and men alike and that works with differences and not with oppositions or gender neutralization.¹⁰⁸ This (in the 1970s) acutely anticipates more contemporary ideas, such as those of J. Butler, Queer Theory, and the theories of trans-subjectivity and intersectionality.¹⁰⁹

Hence, Cixous’s program of a feminine writing is open to, inclusive of, and producible by all individuals, males as well as females, even though Cixous believes that it is currently easier (for historico-cultural reasons) for women to write/think the feminine.¹¹⁰ And ultimately the trajectory of her thinking leads through the feminine to a “better human”: “always ... coming from sexed, marked, different places; and then, in a certain place ... the difference gives way to ... what awaits us all: the human.”¹¹¹ This is a mature feminism, a feminism that never loses sight of the woman’s cause or the vital importance of sexual difference but also dares to implicate itself in behalf of all humanity,

105 Cf. I. Blyth and S. Sellers 2004, 24; A. Bray 2004, 28–42, 56–59; Verena Andermatt Conley 1992, esp. ch. 3; A. Aneja 1999, 58–73.

106 As quoted in S. Sellers 1996, 3.

107 H. Cixous 1986, 83.

108 H. Cixous 1980, 254.

109 H. Cixous belatedly observes that “Medusa has always already been *queer*” (H. Cixous 2015), 144. Cf. A. Aneja 1999, 58–73; Taylor 2018, esp. 50–52. Compare also R. Braidotti’s conception of a “feminist anti-humanism” that argues the impossibility of speaking “in one unified voice about women,” rejecting a “dialectical scheme of thought, where difference or otherness played a constitutive role, marking off the sexualized other (woman)” (2013, 27).

110 Indeed, male writers (e.g., Shakespeare, Genet, Kleist) are among Cixous’s most frequently cited exemplars of feminine writing. For similar cultural reasons women benefit more from bisexuality, “In a certain way, ‘woman is bisexual’” (H. Cixous 1980, 254).

111 H. Cixous and M. Calle-Gruber 1997, 19. Cixous’s habit of thought (which incidentally she shares with the biblical writers) is to think from the particular out, allowing analogy, exemplification, and extrapolation to power the ever wider applications of her ideas. So to think the human by way of the feminine is very natural to her.

women as well as men—"isn't it evident that the penis gets around in my text, that I give it a place and appeal? Of course I do. I want all. I want all of me with all of him. ... But I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female."¹¹² This is a feminism (and femininity) disposed toward a flourishing humanity—Cixous's Evean gambit.

This more ideologically engaged sense of the term feminine also appropriately characterizes the Song, which so obviously both shares certain sensibilities with Cixous (as illustrated above) and stands in opposition to the dominant masculinity of its day. Of course, to what manner of use the Song's feminine ideology would have been put in its own time is a harder question to answer. It may well be that it served to reinforce very traditional (patriarchal, phallogentric, masculinist) values.¹¹³ But even were that true it says nothing about how we twenty-first-century readers of this biblical love story may choose to deploy it. The present and future always remain open. It is our responsibility to make of it what we desire. What Cixous says of parenting is applicable to our thinking through of the "feminine writing" that is the Song of Songs: "No, it's up to you to break the old circuits. It will be the task of woman and man to make the old relationship and all its consequences out-of-date; to think the *launching* of a new subject, into new life, with defamilialization."¹¹⁴

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¹¹² H. Cixous 1980, 262.

¹¹³ Cf. G. Leick 1994, 67–68.

¹¹⁴ H. Cixous 1986, 89.

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PART 2

The Song of Songs in Historical Contexts



Female Voices in Akkadian Love Poetry

Martti Nissinen

The woman in the Song of Songs has been characterized as the most powerful female voice in the entire Bible,¹ and she is probably the most-discussed female character in ancient love lyrics, second perhaps only to Sappho. The woman presented in this love poem is, indeed, an unusual figure in ancient literature: “She betokens a vibrant, knowing agency.”² Her independent voice and sexual subjectivity are remarkable especially against the background of the male-dominated scribal culture, of which even the Song of Songs is undoubtedly the product.³ The female voice of the Song of Songs is not quite unparalleled in its Near Eastern literary context, though. I would like to pay attention to female voices in Babylonian and Assyrian love poems written in the Akkadian language, which derive from a stream of tradition, an offshoot of which even the Song of Songs may be considered.⁴

The Akkadian poems serve as a reminder that the Song of Songs was not first written to form part of the biblical canon but its production and performance owes to a long-standing cultural pattern consisting of both literary forms, religious practices, and political discourse. Since love poems are all about imagination rather than documentation, they may give metaphorical expression for a variety of things, extending the gendered imagination of its audience and performers from emotional eroticism to different aspects of life.

Being part of a Near Eastern cultural pattern, the use of erotic poetry for religious and political purposes did not begin with the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs. This said, it is important to realize that we would know nothing about the Song of Songs, had it never become part of the biblical canon and the Judeo-Christian tradition. By the same token, the modern reader is heavily dependent on the same tradition, not only in terms of interpretation but also of its contemporary use. The Song of Songs may have been “marginalized by Judeo-Christian traditions, occluded by allegorical

1 See F. Scott Spencer 2017, xlv.

2 F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, in chapter 5 of this volume.

3 There is no evidence of any scribal education of women in the Southern Levant, whether in the Iron Age or in the Hellenistic era. See Christopher A. Rollston 2010; David M. Carr 2005, 187–93.

4 For arguments, see Martti Nissinen 2016.

interpretations that explain away its frank eroticism and deflect its celebration of the individual with discourses privileging the divine, history, nationhood, and the like.”⁵ However, if the Song of Song plays any role in today’s public discourse, it is all due to its belonging to these traditions which have both preserved and, in a sense, colonized the poem.

The Akkadian love poems are attested in cuneiform manuscripts from the eighteenth through the third centuries BCE. They are still rather poorly known and do not belong to the standard repertoire of Song of Songs scholarship, perhaps because many of them have been published only fairly recently.⁶ Today, however, we have some twenty individual compositions of love lyrics at our disposal, thanks above all to Nathan Wasserman’s 2016 book, *Akkadian Love Literature of the Third and Second Millennium BCE* (henceforth LAOS 4), which includes new editions of all texts from Old Babylonian (19th–16th cent. BCE) until the Middle Babylonian (16th–12th cent. BCE) and Middle Assyrian (14th–10th cent. BCE) period.⁷ The very important first millennium texts, only three of which are known so far, still have to be sought in other publications.⁸ Altogether, as I have tried to argue in my earlier publications, the preserved examples of Akkadian love literature leave no doubt that the Song of Songs belongs to the same stream of tradition as other specimens of ancient Near Eastern love poetry.⁹

The Akkadian love poems have multiple voices representing female and male, human and divine, individual and collective speakers. Some of the cuneiform tablets representing Akkadian love poetry are mere lists of incipits of love songs probably prepared for archival purposes (LAOS 4 17–19). The incipits

5 Thus the introductory text to the 2019 Chicago Symposium “Let Me Hear Your Voice: Women, the Song of Songs, and Public Discourse,” at <https://sifk.uchicago.edu/events/881/let-me-hear-your-voice-women-the-song-of-songs-and-public-discourse/>, accessed July 28, 2022.

6 Some recent works do make regular references to them, e.g., Jennifer L. Andruska 2019; Brian P. Gault 2019; Elaine T. James 2017a; Meik Gerhards 2010, 100–15; cf. already David M. Carr 2003, 91–107. For a comparison of the image of the woman in the Song of Songs and Mesopotamian texts, see also Anselm C. Hagedorn 2010, esp. 593–601.

7 Nathan Wasserman 2016. Transliterations and translations of the texts are available digitally at <https://seal.huji.ac.il/taxonomy/term/73> and <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/akklove/>, accessed July 28, 2022. Many of these texts were published for the first time in George 2009. Unfortunately, the material published in this important edition is unprovenanced.

8 I.e., the Divine Triangle Drama in W. G. Lambert 1975; the Banitu text in Karlheinz Deller 1983; and the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu in Eiko Matsushima 1987; Alasdair Livingstone 1989, 35–37 (text #14); Martti Nissinen 1998.

9 Martti Nissinen 1998, 624–27; Martti Nissinen 2001, esp. 125–27; Martti Nissinen 2016.

preserved on these tablets amount to nearly two hundred. Each one gives an inkling of the theme of the rest of the poem, often revealing the gender of the addressee—and implicitly, the speaker, since the gender matrix of the Akkadian love poetry is heteronormative. For instance:

“Let me look at you (m.) by the light of the windows.”¹⁰

“You (m.), darling, who loves our lovemaking.”¹¹

Many Akkadian love poems are composed as dialogues or alternating monologues between a male and a female voice, sometimes interrupted by a third party, a kind of “chorus.”¹² Even those texts with only one speaker usually imply the voice of another. Two poems are monologues of a male voice;¹³ otherwise, the single voice usually belongs to a woman. Some poems are descriptive, spoken by an outside observer.¹⁴

On the whole, female voices are quite prominent in the Akkadian love poetry, perhaps even more conspicuous and rich in nuance than the distinctly male voices. The female voice is always that of an individual woman, who talks about herself, her beloved, or her desire. The woman is sometimes explicitly presented as a goddess,¹⁵ while in some cases she may be clearly identifiable as human.¹⁶ If not specifically marked, the female voice is usually interpreted as that of a human woman, but this is, in fact, not necessarily the case. It may be intentionally left up to the reader to decide whether the lovers are human or divine.

10 LAOS 4 18:6: *luppalsakka innūr apātīm*. The male gender of the addressee is implied by the possessive suffix. Henceforth, the quotation marks in citations from the Akkadian poems indicate that the line quoted is an incipit rather than an excerpt from a larger composition.

11 LAOS 4 19 vii 29: *atta māru rāīmu dādīni*. That the addressee is male is revealed by the sg. 2. m. pronoun and the word for “darling,” *māru* (literally “son,” “boy”).

12 Examples of the dialogue form include LAOS 4 8; 10; 11; 15; 16; Nabû and Tašmetu; Divine Triangle Drama. On third parties, see LAOS 4 1 i 18–19, 25–26; ii 18ff.; iii 3–6, 11ff.; LAOS 4 11:1, 13, 1:12(?); LAOS 4 12 refrains on every line; LAOS 4 15 i 1–2, 5, 6, 14–15, 27; ii 7–8; Nabû and Tašmetu lines 1–8, 12, 20ff., 1:9–14, 22–24.

13 LAOS 4 2 and 4.

14 LAOS 4 5; 12; 14; Banitu text.

15 LAOS 4 7; 9 (Ištar); LAOS 4 10 (Nanaya); Nabû and Tašmetu (Tašmetu); Divine Triangle Drama (Ištar, Zarpanitu).

16 E.g., in LAOS 4 16 the female voice talks about goddesses and is praying to them.

1 The Woman Talks about Herself

1.1 *The Woman Flourishing*

When a female voice speaks about herself in the Akkadian love poems, she very often presents herself as attractive and luxuriant—indeed, as flourishing to the utmost:

“Had I only shown my charms to you, darling, darling!”¹⁷

My fruits are unforgettable, my attractiveness is unattainable.¹⁸

The stunning looks of the woman have one single objective: to capture the attention of the beloved, thus initiating an erotic relationship. The woman's beauty is meant to be appreciated by the beloved. Indeed, it is the beloved himself who makes the woman beautiful by his attention:

Tašmetu, looking luxuriant, entered the bedroom ...

(He) “For what, for what are you adorned, my Tašmetu?” (Refrain)

(She) “So that I may go to the garden with you, my Nabû!” (Refrain)¹⁹

(She) [Ma]ke me beautiful! Make me greatly flourish! Make me [happy]!

(He) Let me see the orchard of almond trees!²⁰

Other than being beautiful and attracting sexual attention, the woman may also wish to be socially appreciated. Even her social standing, whether in the social hierarchy of the city or as compared to her female peers, may be made dependent on the admiration of the male beloved:

17 LAOS 4 19 vii 41. For the use of *māru* (literally “son,” “boy”) for male beloved, see *CAD* M/1: 314.

18 LAOS 4 3:23–24: *inbūa ul ša miši / dādūa ul ša kašādī* (translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 92). Cf. the more literal translation of Andrew George (2009, 57): “My fruits are not things to ignore, my charms are not things (easily) taken.”

19 Nabû and Tašmetu (*SAA* 3 14) r. 9, 15–16.

20 LAOS 4 11 r. 2. The word *lammu* is translated as “almond tree,” but this identification is not certain; cf. Nathan Wasserman 2016, 139.

In the assembly of the city and among the people of consequence
 you have invoked my good name, and honored me, my lord!
 How much more could you have exa[lt]ed me?
 I have gained [so] much val[ue] in [my] girlfriends' eye!²¹

In the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu, the goddess expresses uncertainty about her status, comparing herself not to female rivals but to the male “counsellors” (*mālikāni*). She needs to be assured by Nabû that her status is actually elevated above them in the divine hierarchy:

(She) They did not place my throne among the counsellors
 (...)
 (He) Among the counsellors, her throne is foremost!²²

1.2 *The Woman's State of Mind*

The female speakers in the Akkadian love poems do not only depict themselves as they wish to be seen by the male lover and other people, but also describe their feelings and their state of mind when being desperately in love. The constant thinking of the beloved who is not present and, perhaps, not even aware of her attraction to him, may cause mental confusion, physical symptoms, and continuing distress:

I kept forgetting my words,
 [I] had no control of my thoughts, as in [dre]am
 (...)
 I talk about you constantly,
 I am consumed, I am troubled, [I] am distorted.
 I yearned for you again, and became ever more distressed.²³

My (ominous) si[gn]s trouble me:
 My upper lip becomes mo[ist],
 while my lower lip tremb[les]!

21 LAOS 4 15 i 9–13; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 171; cf. Benjamin R. Foster 2005, 163. For problems of translation, see Marcel Sigrist and Joan Goodnick Westenholz 2008, esp. 691–92.

22 Nabû and Tašmetu (SAA 3 14) r. 19, 26.

23 LAOS 4 3 9–10, 14–17; cf. the translations by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 92–92 and Andrew George 2009, 57.

I shall embrace him, I shall kiss [him],
 I shall gaze at [him]!
 (...)

 My eyes are very tired,
 I am sleepless from gazing at him.
 It seems that he walked across my street?
 The day has gone by, where is [my darling]?²⁴

Not surprisingly, the most typical symptom of the lovesickness is sleeplessness. The pining for the beloved is also described in terms of hunger and washing, both expressing the frustration caused by the unfulfilled desire. Washing implies that the woman has to go to bed alone and unsatisfied:

I got worried in my hunger, trembling carried away my sleep.
 I woke up, went through the house, searched around.²⁵

I entered into the pantry,
 lying to sleep without eating.
 My washbasin, when judging the judgment (said):
 “Why are you doing so
 that you are lying down to sleep without eating?”²⁶

She rinsed herself, climbed up, got onto the bed. (Refrain)
 Into a bowl of lapis lazuli, into a bowl of lapis lazuli her tears flow.
 (Refrain)
 With a piece of red wool he wipes away her tears. (Refrain)²⁷

In the last quotation, the woman who goes to sleep is the goddess Tašmetu who is frustrated about the absence of Nabû, her beloved. Her mood changes when Nabû appears to wipe her tears away. Similarly, the woman who “woke up, went through the house, searched around,” soon hears a male voice speaking: “Do not get worried at all!” This changes the mood of her night:

24 LAOS 4 16 ii 20–23, iii 20–23; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 179–81.

25 LAOS 4 11:4; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 134.

26 LAOS 4 1 i 3–7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 69.

27 Nabû and Tašmetu (SAA 3 14) r. 11–12.

I avoid talking, my eyes are drawn,
 my heart is awake though I am sleeping.
 My heart rejoiced in the good news.²⁸

In the same poem, the woman asks her beloved to make her pretty and happy. He²⁹ responds, wishing to see her “orchard of almond trees,” and she replies with a wish of both inward and outward happiness:

(She) [Ma]ke me beautiful! Make me greatly flourish! Make me happy!
 (He) Let me see the orchard of almond trees!
 (She) May my heart be bright! May I be happy in my inside!
 May I rejoice! May I walk along with laughter in the street of the city!³⁰

The openly happy, *ridibund* woman is the opposite figure to the one spending her night in anguished feelings. What the woman desires is not sleep as such—on the contrary, a night without sleep is exactly what she wishes, if only she could spend the night with her beloved. Desires fulfilled, she is happy to eventually sleep in his lap:

“Go away, sleep, let me embrace my darling!”³¹

“Since I was sleeping in (my) darling’s lap.”³²

Let us practice the work of lovers all the night, let us not sleep!
 Let the two of us clinch passionately together in bed!³³

1.3 *The Woman and Her Rivals*

Love causes distress for the female speakers in the Akkadian love poems—not only because of the absence of the male beloved and the insecurity of his

28 LAOS 4 11:6. The verbs in first person singular do not reveal the gender of the speaker. Nathan Wasserman suggests this verse is spoken by the male voice, though he marks it with a question mark (2016, 135). In my interpretation, the one receiving good news is the woman rather than the man.

29 Again, the verbal form does not reveal the gender of the speaker, but the “orchard” that speaker wishes to see can be identified with the flourishing woman.

30 LAOS 4 11 r. 2–3; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 135.

31 LAOS 4 19 vi 19; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 219.

32 LAOS 4 19 vii 48; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 221.

33 LAOS 4 15 i 20–22; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 171; see also Marcel Sigrist and Joan Goodnick Westenholz 2008, 697–98; Benjamin R. Foster 2005, 163.

acceptance, but also because of slander and rivalry. We have already seen the importance of good name and social reputation also in other women's eyes. The concern for the harm caused by other women, for instance, malicious gossiping, finds expression several times in the poems. Sometimes the language of the poems resembles that of incantations wishing the ill-wishers to disappear and to come to shame:

At daytime when he went away from me,
gossiping concerning me was not cut off from their (the other women's)
mouth.

Those who slander me are not gloomy, day and night.
Let your heart be thrumming, may it not accept the lies!³⁴

May my righteousness appear before Ištar the queen!
May my love prevail, may my slanderer come to shame!³⁵

They because I trust my loved one.
My slanderers outnumber the stars of heaven.
May they hide! May they be scarce!
May they hide themselves forever right now!
And as for me, I sat down, listening to the [wo]rds of my lord.³⁶

The poems may even give expression to outright jealousy, expressed in a way that is reminiscent of incantations. One of them reads like a wish of a woman to break another woman's relationship with a man. The text begins with the somewhat enigmatic phrase "A woman she is!" (*sinništum šī*). This probably refers to the goddess Ištar³⁷ whom the female speaker evokes to make her malicious wish come true. The other text describes the feelings of the woman who cannot sleep because of thinking of another woman "who loves you not":

34 LAOS 4 3 28–32; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 92. Cf. the translation by Andrew George 2009, 57, partly based on different interpretations of the Akkadian phrases.

35 LAOS 4 16 i 9–10; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 179.

36 LAOS 4 16 iv 10–16; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 181.

37 See Andrew George 2009, 77, for the spelling of the first syllable of *sinništum* "woman" as the name of the god Šin (^dEN.ZU) and the word itself as a divine epithet. Ištar is called "the great daughter of Šin" in the poem (line 4): *mārat Šin* (^dEN.ZU) *rabītum*.

A woman she is!
 May they not talk favorably with [each other]!
 May they not [kis]s [each other] in the course of night!
 May they not tell each other whatever is pure in their hearts.³⁸

May queen Ištar [pour] confusion over the one who loves you not!
 May she, like me, [be afflicted] with sleeplessness!
 May she be dazed and [restless] all night long!³⁹

The most powerful poetry of rivalry and jealousy can be found in the Divine Triangle Drama involving the god Marduk, his consort Zarpanitu, and Ištar of Babylon who plays the role of Marduk's extramarital girlfriend. The jealousy of Zarpanitu is expressed in strong terms:

You, whoever you are, whatever your name is,
 who always go to the dwelling of my lord:
 Come and do as I tell you!
 Fall from the roof onto a dagger,
 get an iron spike in your side, get sharp arrows!⁴⁰

This text is attested by a larger number of copies than any other Akkadian love poem, the manuscripts dating from the seventh through first centuries BCE.⁴¹ This text (actually a group of texts) probably belonged to rituals performed in Eturkalamma, the temple of Ištar in the city of Babylon. The composition consists of not only poems but also of a ritual tablet that provide this quasi-pornographic outburst of jealousy with a ritual setting difficult to imagine.⁴² Whatever the social and ritual function of this understudied poetry may have been, it gives expression to a woman's jealousy. The extensive

38 LAOS 4 5 1–3; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 102; cf. Andrew George 2009, 77, who translates line 2: “May she not fail (to appear) in the course of the night,” referring to Ištar.

39 LAOS 4 16 ii 6–9; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 179.

40 Divine Triangle Drama 11 B 26–30 (W. G. Lambert 1975, 118–19).

41 The 1959/1975 edition in W. G. Lambert, “The Problem of the Love Lyrics” is outdated and does not include all manuscripts, the youngest of which derives from the Parthian period; see P. M. Hibbert 1984. A new edition based on all extant manuscripts is under preparation by Rocío Da Riva and Nathan Wasserman and will be available at <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/lovelyrics/index.html>, accessed July 28, 2022.

42 For the ritual tablet, see Dietz Otto Edzard 1987.

manuscript material attests to a long and consistent history of its use, although it is difficult to know how the manuscripts especially from places other than Babylon (Nineveh, Assur) related to the actual ritual performances in Babylon.

2 The Woman Talks about Her Beloved

2.1 *The Female Gaze*

The female voice in the Akkadian love poems very often talks about her male beloved. Not only is she sumptuously attractive herself, she is totally awe-struck by the appearance of the male beloved, on whom she cannot stop gazing. The topic of female gaze is common in the Akkadian love literature, even more common than the male gaze. One poem listed in the Middle-Assyrian list of love poems begins with the words: “Lad, since I have seen [you].”⁴³ The woman may watch the man unbeknownst to him, and the very act of gazing raises the woman’s desire:

The [b]oy is not aware of the (girl) [wa]tching [him].⁴⁴

I shall embrace him, I shall kiss him, I shall gaze at [him].

(...)

My eyes are very tired, I am sleepless from gazing at him.⁴⁵

“Let me gaze on you by the light of the window!”⁴⁶

Chorus: Indeed, her lips are relaxed, she carried good news.

She is perfect in her competence!

She looked on your features.⁴⁷

The features of the male beloved are described in divine terms, whether or not he is imagined to be a god. The physical qualities of the man may be mentioned, such as his tallness, but it is first and foremost his “radiant face” that makes the

43 LAOS 4 19 vi 26 (*eṭlu ištu āmurū[ka]*).

44 LAOS 4 3:4; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 91; cf. Andrew George 2009, 57: “Does the darling boy know the girl who is watching him?” (*ul īde [m]ārum [nā]tilas[su]*).

45 LAOS 4 16 ii 23–24, iii 20–21; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 180.

46 LAOS 4 18:6; translation by Andrew George 2009, 73.

47 LAOS 4 15 ii 7–8; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 172. For philological notes, see Marcel Sigrist and Joan Goodnick Westenholz 2008, 703.

woman desire him. Presumably, the face stands for the entire appearance of the man and for the overall impact he makes on her.

I saw your face: you are a god!⁴⁸

Let me gaze at your body, so tall, filled with joy [...].

Muati,⁴⁹ (let me gaze at your body), so tall, filled with joy [...].⁵⁰

The appearance of your face, *oh God* [...], I am shining [...]⁵¹

I am looking at your luminosity.

Let me see your radiant face!

Indeed, [I will ob]serve—let me make love (to you).⁵²

There is one part of the male body that is mentioned in quite concrete terms more than once, namely the male organ. Explicit references to it can be found in four incipits of poems listed in LAOS 4 18. Three poems begin with a reference to the big size of the male lover's penis, while one expresses concern for its proper functioning:

“Big one, big one, do not arise!”

“Let me grow long for the girl!”

“It is so enlarged! That of an elephant was smaller than yours.”

“The wild bull is not standing—let the red gazelles come out!”⁵³

48 LAOS 4 3:17–18; see Nathan Wasserman 2016, 92; Andrew George 2009, 57. The Akkadian verse uses abbreviated forms: *pānikāmūr ilāt* for *pānika āmur ilāta*.

49 Muati is the divine male lover of the speaker, goddess Nanaya.

50 LAOS 4 10:12–13; translation by Nathan Wasserman, who is reckoning with a double duty of the cohortative verb *luštešbu*, which corresponds to the parallelistic structure of the verse (2016, 126).

51 LAOS 4 8 ii 10–11; see Nathan Wasserman, who tentatively restores the sign after *šikin pānika* as DINGIR “God” (2016, 117–18). This is not restored by Eckart Frahm 2009, 144.

52 LAOS 4 1 iii 30–32; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 71.

53 LAOS 4 18:5, 8, 9, 12–13; translations by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 71; cf. Andrew George 2009, 73.

2.2 *Woman Missing and Waiting*

When not gazing at the beloved, the woman is often found missing him and waiting for him, or at least for a message from him. The state of waiting is, understandably, characterized by sitting idle and staying awake:

“I was thinking about you at night.”⁵⁴

I shall sit and wait—maybe he is on his way to me.⁵⁵

My love had to go out to the steppe, while I spend here the night.
I embrace my delight, but the dove rose aloft.
My love of the steppe, may the trappers return him back to me!
You will embrace my delights. May the gardener bring him to me!⁵⁶

You have made me sit (tied) in strings:
I am looking for a message of my lovemaking, but he withholds it from
[me].⁵⁷

May your message arrive [to me ...],
may your message come to me,
so that I, oh I, will hear your well-being.⁵⁸

The woman describes herself as virtually paralyzed and deprived of agency. Incapable of taking action, she cannot but sit, stay awake, and wait for her beloved to be brought to her, or at least for a message to come from him. This description of the woman's state of mind and body makes her appear more passive and helpless than any other image of her in the Akkadian poems known to us.

Sometimes the woman's wish of the beloved's appearance comes true. The so-called Middle Babylonian Ballad (LAOS 4 7) describes the entering of the “shepherd, Ištar's lover” to the house of the woman's parents, but the place of encounter can as well be a garden or the meadow where the “shepherd”

54 LAOS 4 19 vii 46; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 221.

55 LAOS 4 16 iv 5; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 181.

56 LAOS 4 6 i 6–15; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 106; cf. Brigitte Groneberg 1999, esp. 178.

57 LAOS 4 1 ii 10–12; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 70.

58 LAOS 4 13 ii 8–9; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 152; cf. Joan Goodnick Westenholz 1987.

pastures his flocks, both typical symbols for the venue of the celebration of love and lovemaking:

Come in, shepherd, Ištar's lover!
Spend the night here, Ištar's lover!
At your entering, my father is happy for you,
my mother, Ningal, is rejoiced over you.
She served you oil in a bowl.⁵⁹

"Whenever you enter—oh Lord, it is now!"⁶⁰

Ištar saw the beloved which she was seeking
in the hut of the Lord of Oath, and said to him:
"Oh you, come to me, my shepherd!
Let me lead you to the place, oh my shepherd!
Direct your cattle (to that place)!
[*The son?*] of Aššur bestowed junipers on our pasture which is abundant.
It is you who shall shepherd our meadow,
you shall constantly shepherd our river-flat which is abundant."⁶¹

Let me go to the garden, to the garden and to the [Lord]! (Refrain)
Let me go to the beautiful garden! (Refrain)
They did not place my throne among the counsellors. (Refrain)
(...)
Let my Tašmetu come with me to the garden! (Refrain)
Among the counsellors, her throne is foremost! (Refrain)⁶²

2.3 *Shepherd and King*

The most common epithets used of the beloved are "shepherd" and "king." In the Middle Assyrian Song list (LAOS 4 19), at least five songs begin by calling the beloved the "shepherd," while "king" is mentioned in the first line of at least four songs in this text. The shepherd imagery undoubtedly derives from the tradition of the Dumuzi and Ištar poems, where Dumuzi is regularly

59 LAOS 4 7:1–4; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 111; cf. Jeremy A. Black 1983, esp. 30.

60 LAOS 4 19 vii 10; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 220.

61 LAOS 4 9:6–8; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 120; cf. the translations of Simo Parpola in Martti Nissinen 2016, 118–19, and Wiebke Meinhold 2009, 303. Wasserman agrees with Parpola's reconstruction [DUM]U? aš-šur "[the son?] of Aššur" (line 7) but translates nevertheless "[*The daughter*]r of Aššur," (Nathan Wasserman 2016, 122).

62 Nabû and Tašmetu (SAA 3 14) r. 17–19, 25–26.

called “shepherd.” Moreover, it serves the purpose of poetic staging, giving the love-making not only a bucolic but also a private context by setting it at a distance from the urban sphere and other people, as in the following incipits:

“[...] Oh shepherd, hang on and let’s, the two of us, make love!”

“[Ent]er, shepherd, Istar’s lover!”

“[The war]rior, the shepherd, I repeatedly praised.”

“[...] that shepherd!”

“Verily, my shepherd, lead me to the house!”⁶³

“Oh my king, in your praise.”

“King, your shining aura ...”

“Eya! My king, joy ...”

“King, noble prince, lord of both heaven and earth.”

“The one who goes down to the garden, oh king, the cutter of cedar!”⁶⁴

“It is the king of the land! How sweet is the cedar!”⁶⁵

The royal image can as well be understood as *Travestie-nach-oben*, giving the lovers’ affair a royal aura.⁶⁶ Sometimes, however, the royal image is not just poetic, since some poems name the king explicitly, thus making him either the protagonist or at least the beneficiary of the love celebrated in the poem. The named kings include three subsequent kings of the first Babylonian dynasty, Abi-ešuh (1711–1684 BCE), Ammi-ditana (1683–1647 BCE), and Ammi-šaduqa (1646–1626 BCE), as well as the Middle-Assyrian king Shalmaneser (I: 1263–1234 BCE; or II: 1031–1019 BCE). These references not only help to date

63 LAOS 4 19 i 5, 6, 7, 8; ii 8; translations by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 215–216.

64 LAOS 4 19 ii 43, iii 5, 11, 26, vii 28; translations by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 217–218, 220.

65 LAOS 4 18:33; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 192.

66 Cf. Hans-Peter Müller 1992, esp. 5.

the poetry in question, but they also reflect a theology according to which the earthly king was seen as participating the (divine) love expressed in the poem:

Daily life for the king who dwells in s[ecurity ...]
Nanaya, life for the king Abi-e[šuh]]
She let him dwell in security [...]!⁶⁷

[An o]men for your well-being and your everlasting life!
May Ištar grant you, Ammi-ditana, her life anew!
May the loved one be in your heart, may you cherish her favorably!⁶⁸

“My beloved, Ammi-šaduqa the [illustrious?]!”⁶⁹

She accepted the hand-lifting of Shalmaneser.
She gave him what he asked for.⁷⁰

Mentioning the ruling king, either as the protagonist of the divine-human love relationship or the beneficiary of the divine love-making, concretizes the royal metaphor in a manner that places the king in an intimate, familial relationship with the gods. This makes the love poetry part of, not only theological, but also of political discourse.

3 The Woman Talks about Lovemaking

3.1 *Woman Seducing the Male Beloved*

The exuberant looks of the woman, her gazing at the male beloved, and her longing for his company are, of course, expressions of her desire. Many times, the woman goes a step further and communicates her desire quite openly to her beloved. One of the poems listed in the Middle Assyrian Song List begins with the words “To the lusty shepherd I will smile,” but we do not know how the poem continues from this seductive gesture.⁷¹ In another poem, we find a fuller description of what the woman wants to happen between the two lovers:

67 LAOS 4 10 r. 5–7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 127.

68 LAOS 4 6 iv 6–11; translation Nathan Wasserman 2016, 107; cf. Brigitte Groneberg, 1999, 180.

69 LAOS 4 17 7–8; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 189; the reconstruction of the word *šunundum* “illustrious” is possible but uncertain.

70 LAOS 4 9 r. 6–7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 121.

71 LAOS 4 19 ii 7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 216.

Come to me! I want to be embraced as my heart told me.
 Let us practice the work of lovers all the night, let us not sleep!
 Let the two of us clinch passionately together in bed!
 Be mingled over fruits and desires!
 Provide me with vitality!
 Burn your craving upon me!
 My love is poured on you entirely,
 take as much as you desire!⁷²

The passionate words of the woman are part of her dialogue with his beloved and, hence, give the impression of a real and not just imagined encounter between the two. The dialogue does not have an easy-to-follow plot, however, and it seems to be left to the reader/listener of the poem to decide whether the sexual encounter actually takes place. A more transparent case is at hand in the Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu, where the goddess expresses her wish to go to the garden with her beloved to experience something that she describes as the plucking his fruit and the twittering of his birds, and receives an answer from the god who invites her to enjoy those pleasures:

(She) May my eyes see the plucking of your fruit! (Refrain)
 May my ears hear the twittering of your birds! (Refrain)
 (...)
 (He) May her eyes see the plucking of my fruit! (Refrain)
 May her ears hear the twittering of my birds! (Refrain)
 May her eyes behold, may her ears listen! (Refrain)⁷³

The pleasures of Nabû and Tašmetu in the garden have a quasi-concrete point of reference in the sacred marriage ritual of these deities, the last part of which happened in the garden where the statues of the deities were taken in a solemn procession.⁷⁴ This Neo-Assyrian ritual is the only case where there is a clear connection between a love poem and a ritual that in all likelihood gives the poem a historical setting. However, many of the love poems contain explicit or implicit references to rituals,⁷⁵ suggesting that, however “religious” they may sound to us, they have been used in a ritual context.

72 LAOS 4 15 i 20–25; translation Nathan Wasserman 2016, 171; cf. Marcel Sigrist and Joan Goodnick Westenholz 2008, 682; Foster 2005, 163.

73 Nabû and Tašmetu (SAA 3 14) r. 20–21, 30–32.

74 See Martti Nissinen 2016, 97–99.

75 The composition of the Divine Triangle Drama includes a ritual tablet; LAOS 4 10 refers to the performance of a ritual for the well-being of King Abi-ešuh (lines 5–6); LAOS 4 15 presents King Rim-Sin and the goddess Nanaya as participants of a sacred marriage;

3.2 *Making Love*

While in some poems, the woman's desire is described but not its fulfillment, many poems actually describe the lovemaking of the couple. One poem begins with the line "Let us complete the deed of lovemaking!"⁷⁶ suggesting a continuation along similar lines. The pleasure caused by lovemaking is typically expressed with metaphors of sweet taste of fruit and honey, and the passion is also compared to a lightning:

[My lord], so sweet is your passion, the appeal of your love is sated with honey.

Muati, so sweet is your passion, the appeal of your love is sated with honey.⁷⁷

Like a ripe apple,
which in the beginning of the year heaped up its fruit,
and the lightnings of Adad passed over it,
so, indeed, the lightning of lovemaking passed upon me.⁷⁸

Rise and let me make love [with you]!
In your soft lap, that of waking-time, how sweet is your lovemaking!
Your fruits are profuse.⁷⁹

Sometimes the sexual encounter can be expressed in more graphic terms, referring to the female or male sexual organs. The reference may be what in our reading might be sensed as quite elegant and beautiful, but it may also sound to us brutally pornographic:

I, in the house, want to make you accept
happy mood, attractiveness, mutual love!
I make excessive the thin curl over you.
That which you love, my vulva, is laid down for you: wide, spacious gate.⁸⁰

LAOS 4 6 includes a blessing for King Ammi-ditana (lines iv 6–11); the refrain of LAOS 4 12 "Celebration is the foundation for the city!" (*rīšātuma išdum ana ālim*) seems to place the poem in a ritual context; and LAOS 4 9 refers to the hand-lifting prayer of King Shalmaneser (lines r. 4–7).

76 LAOS 4 18:7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 191.

77 LAOS 4 10 9–10; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 126.

78 LAOS 4 1 i 8–13; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 69.

79 LAOS 4 13 i 3–7; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 151; cf. Joan Goodnick Westenholz 1987, 423.

80 LAOS 4 11 r. 7–8; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 136.

[Become er]ect! Feed yourself!
 Become erect! Feed yourself with my lovemaking!
 My lap is like the best of oils.
 [I] will grow for you a new fruit!⁸¹

Sixty and sixty relieve themselves repeatedly with her vagina
 —Celebration is a foundation for the city!
 The men got tired, Ištar did not tire—(ditto).
 “Place it, guys, in the pretty vulva!”—(ditto).
 As the young woman was speaking—(ditto),
 The young men heard and yielded to her order—(ditto).⁸²

The insatiable lust of Ištar in the last-quoted poem has lent support to the idea that the Akkadian love poetry, and the possible cultic practices with which it is associated, were especially obscene if not sexually depraved. However, there is no evidence for any ritual sexual activity inspired by the poetry. The graphic kind of expression cannot be said to be the trademark of the Akkadian love poems, which can describe the lovemaking also in a sensitive and beautiful language, like the following:

And I, through your love and your good lovemaking I find refuge again
 and again.⁸³

4 Gender Matrix

The passages from Akkadian love poetry quoted above may have given the impression that the male protagonist pretty much defines what the woman is supposed to think and do. Her imagination is centered on him, she wants nothing better than to make love with him, and as such, she would be the ideal (rather than real) woman that a male audience imagines: sexy, submissive, and tireless in bed, always ready to come up to the man's needs and expectations.⁸⁴ Some features in the Akkadian love poetry indeed point towards such a conclusion. The woman may pray to the male beloved, promising to become his slave and to do whatever he tells her to do, in however aggressive manner:

81 LAOS 4 11:11–12; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 135.

82 LAOS 4 12:16–20; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 148.

83 LAOS 4 1 iv 34–36; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 72.

84 Cf. David J. A. Clines 1995, esp. 105–6.

I am chosen—submissive, indeed, a slave for you.
 Truthful she is: me—your favorite sign!
 (...)
 I will be suitable for you, I will be submissive to you.
 Verily! My love is your gift!⁸⁵

You have accepted my prayer, may your heart be satisfied.
 (...)
 If I only could pray to him, to my master!⁸⁶

As for me, my boy-friend scares me, (ditto): “I will lift you up like a wall, I will bring you down like a ditch. I will break you like a ... (etc.)” Come, my lord of beauty, I will ... Should you lift me up like a wall, people [will ...] in my shade. Should you bring me down like [...] Should you break me [...] (etc.)⁸⁷

This, however, is only the flipside of the coin. In the Old Babylonian list of incipits of love poems, two poems begin with the lines that state the contrary:

“To slavery I shall not degrade myself before you!”

“I shall not serve before my friend.”⁸⁸

The submissive image of the woman may, thus, correspond more to the poetic strategy of each text rather than to a general idea of the woman's passive and subservient social or sexual role. In fact, the female speaker is presented as acting quite independently. She goes to search for her beloved, and the imagery of trapping and catching does not suggest a strategy based on passivity. In some verses, she might sit idle and wait for the man, while in others, she takes initiative:

85 LAOS 4 3 I: 21–22, 25–26; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 92; cf. the slightly different translation of Andrew George 2009, 57.

86 LAOS 4 15 i 8, ii 1–4; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 171, 172; cf. Marcel Sigrist and Joan Goodnick Westenholz 2008, 682–683.

87 Rm II 385:8–18; translation by W. G. Lambert 1975, 124–25.

88 LAOS 4 18: 24, 25; translations by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 192; cf. Andrew George 2009, 73.

It is Dumuzi for whom Ištar keeps searching.
 “Oh my shepherd!” She searches the pasture.⁸⁹

I have thrown my coop on the young man, so that I may catch the dove.
 (The coop) of my delights *Nanaya*(?) will fill for me.⁹⁰

I will catch you, and this very day
 I shall reconcile your love with mine.
 I keep on praying to Nanaya,
 (so that) I shall accept your peace, my lord, forever as a gift.⁹¹

(She) Like a [*robb*]er I want to plunder your attractiveness!
 (He) When may I pull out the nose of your desire.⁹²

Tonight, oh darling, I will make you pass the night (with me).⁹³

The playful dialogues between the lovers more often than not present them as equals rather than emphasizing hierarchical sexual roles. Ištar, less surprisingly, is the female voice in the Akkadian poetry (and not just love poetry), who may assume the active sexual role normally reserved for hegemonic males.⁹⁴ In the poem where she appears as insatiably lusty, she makes a crowd of young men to yield to her order:

Gather around me the men of your city
 —Celebration is a foundation for the city!,
 Let us go to the shadow of the city wall!
 —Celebration is a foundation for the city!,
 (...)

89 LAOS 4 9:1; cf. Nathan Wasserman 2016, 120; cf. Simo Parpola in Martti Nissinen 2016, 118; Wiebke Meinhold 2009, 303.

90 LAOS 4 6 i 16–20; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 106. Line 20 (the second line of the verse translated here) is very difficult to interpret; cf. the translation of Brigitte Groneberg, partly based on different readings of the cuneiform: “Was mein glückliches Gelächter betrifft: die Zustimmung, die ich finde, füllt mich an(?)” (1999, 179).

91 LAOS 4 16 i 22–26; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 179.

92 LAOS 4 11:2. The “nose of your desire” (*appi lalêki*) most probably refers to clitoris; see Nathan Wasserman 2016, 136.

93 LAOS 4 19 vii 13; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 220.

94 For Ištar's liminal roles, see Zainab Bahrani 2001, 141–60; Rivkah Harris 1991; Brigitte Groneberg 1986.

As the young woman was speaking
 —Celebration is a foundation for the city!,
 The young men heard and yielded to her order
 —Celebration is a foundation for the city!⁹⁵

The gender matrix of Akkadian love poetry, hence, is certainly based on the patriarchal model, but at the same time, it does not reproduce the patriarchal hierarchy in a simple hegemonic manner but makes the female voice independent and, at times, remarkably active. The woman's image is not consistent or uniform, the poems give expression to strong and independent as well as weak and submissive agencies. The love poetry presents women's agency in a manner known from love incantations but distinct from any other genre of cuneiform literature.⁹⁶

5 Song of Songs and Akkadian Love Poetry

Both the Akkadian love poetry and the Song of Songs make the voice of the woman loud and heard. Any reader of the Akkadian poems who is familiar with the Song of Songs is likely to find countless points of comparison between the texts. The woman of the Song of Songs in many ways resembles her Mesopotamian counterparts. She is lovesick (Song 2:5), longing for her beloved and sleeping while her heart is awake (5:2). She appears exuberant to him (6:10), and she certainly takes initiative in their relationship. She invites the male beloved (1:4; 7:12; 8:14), sometimes waiting patiently for him (5:2–3), sometimes going out to look for him (3:1–5; 5:6–7). The societal expectations of the woman's role and behavior are transgressed by poetical means in the Song of Songs as in many Akkadian love poems. Both royal metaphors (1:4, 12; 3:6–11; 6:8–10) and pastoral metaphors (1:7–8; 2:16) are used of the male beloved, sometimes with virtually same words and expressions. Even more, the metaphors used in the Song of Songs are similar to the Akkadian poetry to the extent that is difficult to explain without the assumption of a common stream of tradition.⁹⁷ The plucking of fruit (2:3, 13; 5:1; 7:9, 14) and the voice of birds (2:14), the garden as the scene of lovemaking (4:12–5:1), the radiance of

95 LAOS 4 12 19–20; translation by Nathan Wasserman 2016, 148.

96 The love incantations which are in many ways related to the love poetry, and can be considered a subgenre of love literature. Nathan Wasserman includes the incantations in his collection of Akkadian love literature; see Nathan Wasserman 2016, 235–74 (LAOS 4 20–34).

97 For more arguments to this effect, see Martti Nissinen 2016, 154–59.

the appearance of the beloved (5:10)—all this is expressed both verbally and functionally in a similar manner. The dialogical structure with interventions of a collective third party should also be mentioned as an important structural feature shared by the Song of Songs and the Akkadian love poetry. In this way, both traditions significantly give the woman, or a group of women, an independent voice.

At the same time, many differences between the Song of Songs and the Akkadian love poetry can be easily observed. The Song of Songs has no divine protagonists which, given the probable provenance of the text as we know it in Hellenistic Judaism,⁹⁸ would be theologically impossible anyway. For the same reason, the Song of Songs does not mention rituals—that the text indeed had a ritual use at some point is indicated by the rabbinical discussion of whether it had a hand-defiling quality, which would indicate the inclusion of the scroll among the authoritative writings.⁹⁹ All this is caused by the different socio-religious context which has an effect on the poetic expression of the Song of Songs. Even the Early Jewish context, however, does not set the Song of Songs worlds apart from the Akkadian poems as poetic description of love, whether human or divine, and as an expression of human emotions.

Another difference reflecting the different socio-religious contexts is the lack of individual names in the Song of Songs, with the exception of King Solomon. The attribution of the poem to Solomon carries the cultural memory of the royal context of love poetry, but otherwise his roles and images have little to do with the kings mentioned by name in the Akkadian poems who are not legendary figures but ruling monarchs. Evidently, the community that used the Song of Songs had no need or will to mention contemporary rulers, but they could play rather freely with cultural memories related to Solomon. The subtle irony dealt to Solomon in the Song of Songs would hardly have been possible with regard to contemporary rulers.¹⁰⁰

Even the female voice and image in the Akkadian poems is sometimes constructed in ways not to be found in the Song of Songs. Expressions of jealousy, so strong in some of the Akkadian poems, are totally missing, and female rivals do not really show up; other women are not presented as seriously competing with the woman—rather, they provide her with peer-support. While the female image of the Song of Songs is by no means uniform and unchanging,

98 The “late” (i.e., Late Persian-Hellenistic) date of the Song of Songs has been, in my view convincingly, argued by Hans-Peter Müller 1992; Meik Gerhards 2010, 29–60 (Hellenistic); cf. Frederick W. (Chip) Dobbs-Allsopp 2005b.

99 mYad 3:5; see John Barton 2012.

100 Irony towards Solomon’s character in the Song of Songs has been detected by Annette Schellenberg 2020; Pekka Särkiö 2018, 253–80; Martti Nissinen 2019, esp. 252–54.

it is still less contradictive with regard to the gender hierarchy: both the submissive woman and the dominatrix that can be seen in the Akkadian poetry are missing from the Song. Perhaps the most significant difference is the way the human gaze is constructed. In the Song of Songs the male gaze prevails, as Cheryl Exum has shown, while in the Akkadian poems, it is mostly the woman who looks at the man and adores him.¹⁰¹ To what extent the prominence of the female gaze indicates a different sexual agency is a question worth further discussion.

In terms of style and erotic expression, it has been noted (usually in favor of the Song of Songs) that the Akkadian love poetry uses much more graphic, if not pornographic, language. Even though these observations are usually based on much smaller evidence than can be presented today, it is quite true that lovemaking is often described explicitly and with unambiguous vocabulary in the Akkadian poems, whereas the language of the Song of Songs is metaphorical and leaves much more to the reader's imagination. Sexual organs in particular are mentioned without hesitation in the Akkadian texts, while the Song of Songs speaks only suggestively of the female organ, while the penis seems to be absent even from metaphorical expression.

In comparative studies, differences are more interesting than similarities. The differences between the Song of Songs and the Akkadian love poetry are evident but hardly invalidate the theory of their shared stream of tradition. Transmission of a tradition always entails transformation, which in the case of the Song of Songs can be seen quite clearly: the specific socio-religious circumstances in the time of its composition prevent certain kinds of poetic expressions (e.g., divine couples) and deprives others of meaning (e.g., contemporary kings). Stylistic differences, especially with regard to sexually explicit language, may be due to different uses and functions, ritual or non-ritual. The style of Akkadian love poems is sometimes reminiscent of incantations, which may reflect that their use and ritual function was perhaps different from that of the Song of Songs (what little can be known of it); however, as some prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible demonstrate (e.g., Ezekiel 16 and 23), graphic language as such did not prevent some texts from becoming part of the authoritative Scripture and as such, a ritual object.

What the differences in the voice and image of the female protagonists—for example the relative prevalence of the female gaze in the Akkadian poetry—might indicate is a topic that would need to be studied in more

101 J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 22–24; J. Cheryl Exum 2000, esp. 32–33.

depth.¹⁰² Any definitive conclusions are, in any case, hampered by the fact that our evidence is quite fragmentary and does not permit us to see a full picture of ancient love literature. We should be especially cautious about far-reaching assumptions concerning the gender matrix or women's social positions based on these few pieces of poetry, each of which have their own poetical, ideological, and theological strategies, the simple combining of which does not necessarily tell us the whole story of ancient Near Eastern women, men, or love. Neither the Song of Songs nor the Akkadian poems reflect every aspect of erotic expression, and even more importantly, the poems should not be read as documents of their audiences' gendered cultures but, rather, as artistic expressions of gendered imagination. Some features, such as the manifestly unconventional figure of the goddess Ištar, even make one ask whether some of the poems could be read as examples of queer worldmaking, creating their own counterpublics.¹⁰³

6 Sex in Public and the Question of Audiences

Whatever the differences and similarities between the Akkadian love poems and the Song of Songs, the most significant difference concerns the audience. The Akkadian love poetry has no modern audience beyond the very small circle of scholars who are able to read them. The Song of Songs, on the other hand, is read and reflected widely even today because it is included in the Jewish and Christian Bibles and has an unbroken reception history since Late Antiquity. The Song of Songs belongs to the realm of public speech and its reading has an impact even in today's world, whereas the Akkadian love poetry has had no reception history since ancient times, and its interpretation has no impact beyond the Academy. One might argue that when it comes to the topic of this volume—women, the Song of Songs, and public discourse—comparison with the Akkadian poems makes little sense.

However, wherever there is public discourse there is also an audience. The questions put forward by Anna Marsh in chapter 9 of this volume, *What is it?*, and especially, *Why is it here?*, are relevant first and foremost from the audience's perspective. We know virtually nothing about the earliest audiences of

102 See Jennifer Andruska's appropriate questions (June 3–5, 2019) regarding the female gaze: is it indeed unrequited and, therefore, considered inappropriate, as Nathan Wasserman suggests (2016, 51–52)?

103 For queer worldmaking and counterpublics, see Rhiannon Graybill in chapter 2 of this volume.

the Song of Songs before the Common Era, but we *are* the audience of this text here and now. The Akkadian poems with occasional references to their royal and ritual contexts are somewhat more yielding with respect to their early audiences, but our knowledge is still haphazard and insufficient. The very fact that ancient love poems (including the Song of Songs) were written down and the written artefacts were kept in sanctuaries, libraries, and the scribes' workshops for further use implies that they were meant to be part of public performances, at least if they were used in rituals.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, since the poems (including the Song of Songs) seem to draw from the reservoir of ancient Near Eastern poetic tradition, they are likely to have had multiple audiences who needed and used them for different purposes. As Rhiannon Graybill writes in chapter 2 of this volume, sex in public is always mediated, and this mediation serves political and ideological (including religious) functions.¹⁰⁵ If this were not true, the Song of Songs or the Akkadian love poems would never have been mediated to their audiences, and the Song of Songs' rich history of interpretation would never have emerged. Public space is political space, and some Akkadian love poems are quite explicit about their royal political context. The Song of Songs is not an overtly political text, but as the contributions to this volume demonstrate, it does not leave its readers ignorant about the political spaces surrounding the implied reader.¹⁰⁶ Evidently, a poem does not need to be explicitly political (or religious) to serve political (or religious) functions.

Comparing the Song of Songs with the Akkadian love poetry may be due to a purely historical interest (if there is such a thing), but it may also point towards the politics of reading in today's context. "People have power, not texts,"¹⁰⁷ which means, among other things, that some texts matter more than others. The Song of Songs is a powerful tool in its readers' hands because it belongs, not only to the biblical canon, but even to the cultural canon of large parts of the world. The Akkadian love poems will always be dwarfed by the Song of Songs when it comes to cultural prominence, and they could be seen as providing another exotic but hermeneutically harmless and powerless counterpart to its expression of gendered love. Reading Akkadian poems may not overwhelm us the way the Song of Songs does, and we may not be equally unsettled when

104 David J. A. Clines 1995, 98: "A text is a production, a product, made in order to be copied, to be circulated. It is, moreover, a commodity, created to be sold in the market place, consumed by customers."

105 Cf. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1998.

106 Cf., e.g., Yvonne Sherwood in chapter 11 of this volume.

107 Thus Karen Guth in chapter 13 of this volume, quoting Renita Weems.

reading misogyny or sexualized violence happening in them.¹⁰⁸ All this, of course, depends on the reader, but as a rule, the relative importance of a text diminishes when cultural distance grows.

From the historical perspective, the Akkadian poems represent the culturally dominant tradition, of which the Song of Songs can be considered the offshoot. Reading the texts side by side may help one appreciate the Song of Songs as another specimen of ancient love poetry. Being the only surviving love poetry from the ancient Southern Levant written in Hebrew makes the Song of Songs a special case, but when it comes to the contents and poetic expression, it clearly represents many (but not all) aspects of the shared ancient Near Eastern tradition. The comparative reading is not dependent on the canonical status or the reception history of the Song of Songs, hence it can be seen as a way of returning this love poem to its pre-canonical context—perhaps even of its decolonization by releasing it from the modern cultural framework set for it by heavy layers of Jewish and Christian interpretation.

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108 This concern is expressed in many contributions to this book; see the articles of Elaine James, Anna Marsh, Rhiannon Graybill, Karen Guth, and Yvonne Sherwood.

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Recovering Women from the Scholars (Even from Me)

Deborah A. Green

On its surface, *Song of Songs Rabbah*, a sixth-century collection of Palestinian rabbinic interpretations based on the *Song of Songs*, appears to contain many more positive representations of women than just about any other rabbinic text—at least from the perspective of the rabbis themselves. At the conference in Chicago, I catalogued these and discussed briefly the outliers. I also surmised that the reason for these positive representations was a connection between the young woman in the poems and the overarching rabbinic metaphor that she should be understood to be the personification of Israel. While this in itself would not serve as sufficient reason for the positive representation, Rabbi Judah asserts within *Songs Rabbah*, “The Song of Songs is not expounded in a bad sense, but only in a good sense, for the Song of Songs was revealed only for the praise of Israel.”¹ However, in light of Erin Galgay Walsh’s response, I am considering a revision of my original argument.² Yes, on the surface *Songs Rabbah* does present mostly positive representations of women from the rabbis’ own perspectives. At the same time, however, these are, as Walsh pointed out, all relational.

The rabbis, and my catalogue as well, consider the “positionality” (Walsh’s term) with respect to the male rabbinic voice. These female characters are “mothers,” “wives,” and “daughters.” In the parables in which the king is the primary protagonist, the narrative plot or point of view centers on the king. For example, the king holds a banquet; the king has a problem; the king goes on a trip abroad. Female characters appear as “queens” and “princesses,” most often in relation to the king. As such, they are not fully formed characters understood in their own right as this or that “person” who acts of their own volition or motivation. They either simply fulfill a role or react in some manner to the king. In the small number of parables in which the female characters are prime movers of the plot, the focus is on how those actions affect the king (e.g., his feelings). The rabbis thereby create distance between themselves and

1 *Songs Rabbah* 1:12:1; 2:4:1.

2 Erin Galgay Walsh June 3–5, 2019.

their “subjects” (or, should we say, “objects”) without real understanding of the female characters as people; that is to say, they do not consider these characters in the same manner as they consider male characters ... or themselves for that matter. Considering the “positionality” inevitably led me back to the work of other scholars who study gender issues in rabbinic texts and society.

Drawing on the work of Jacob Neusner,³ Judith Baskin argues that rabbinic views of women are cases of “alterity”; that is, women are something so “other,” so different, they are in no way comparable to men. And by “other” she means “inferior.”⁴ And she is not only thinking of midrashic characters; she is including rabbinic perceptions of women in the Jewish community—women that the rabbis knew. While rabbinic attitudes as demonstrated in *Songs Rabbah* may not be as extreme as Baskin asserts, the rabbinic views of the female characters clearly demonstrate a position of men and male interests as the “norm,” and those of female characters and women in relation and reaction to that central position. The work of Neusner, Baskin and others as well as the conference itself, which “aim[ed] to bring the Song of Songs into a public dialogue shaped by the complex concerns of the current moment” took me beyond the texts at hand. The current moment to which the conference addressed itself was the #MeToo Movement. And, while this movement brought up many strong emotions and reactions to my own personal #MeToo moments from years past, it also galvanized me to examine how I feel as a scholar of rabbinic material who is a highly educated white woman in the United States (i.e., privileged). In a vibrant community of women younger than me, who will no longer tolerate those #MeToo moments hidden in obscurity, I have been able to wrestle with these texts in a new way. I offer this to you, reader, openly, publicly, and with a strong awareness of its potential deficiencies and some cognizance of my own biases.

In addition to investigation of how the rabbis view women in relation to themselves in these texts, I also see a need to look at the problem of midrash creation and dissemination (redaction of the edited pieces). R. Akiba is

3 Baskin wrote that Neusner had a “recognition of the rabbinic representation of women as anomalies or aberrations in an idealized vision of a world in which ‘man is normal and woman is abnormal’” (Jacob Neusner 1979, 97, as quoted by Judith Baskin 2014, 33).

4 “However, most feminist scholars would agree that the statement, ‘women are a separate people’ (B. Shabbat 62a), underlies rabbinic approaches in every place and time. Thus, it can be said that rabbinic writings generally depict women as divinely created human entities with physical characteristics, innate capacities, and social functions inherently other from those of men. Due to their essential qualities, overwhelmingly understood to be inferior to those of men, women are portrayed as occupying a subordinate place in a social order where only free unblemished Jewish males participate fully in Israel’s covenant with God” (Judith Baskin 2014, 34). On gender “alterity,” see also Judith Baskin 2002.

famously quoted as saying that anyone who sings the Song of Songs in a banquet house should be excluded from the world to come.⁵ Apart from the obvious point that Song of Songs probably *was* recited or sung in bars and restaurants because of its sexual nature, R. Akiba makes a forceful comment about location. He appears to want to control recital of the Song to ensure it is not performed in a non-rabbinically-approved space. One can easily surmise that he would have no quarrel with its repetition in the home, the rabbinic school or academy, or the synagogue.⁶ With rabbinic concern to delineate private and public spaces for such quotidian activities as carrying items on the Sabbath (m. Shabbat 1.1), one could imagine that a public space other than the synagogue for recitation of scriptural texts as racy as the Song would be forbidden. The Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanhedrin 101a) later references that a verse from Song of Songs—and any other biblical verse, for that matter—recited at an inappropriate “time” (i.e., improper time or place) brings evil into the world.

While R. Akiba and the later sages seek to prohibit inappropriate singing of the Song, they do not restrict the discussion and interpretation of biblical verses at meal-times (also in b. Sanhedrin 101a). To be sure, though, these discussions would have been primarily among the rabbis and their male students. Women may have been present if the discussion took place at the home table, but it is unlikely they were included directly; they would have “caught Torah ‘on the fly.’”⁷ Rabbinic study, whether in the home, courtyard, or under a tree, was a masculine pursuit almost closed to women with one or two exceptions mentioned in the texts.⁸ I have long considered that even at times of “public” rabbinic lectures, eulogies, and sermons, the audience must have been predominantly, if not in some venues entirely, made up of men. Although we have evidence that women were involved in public life in the early centuries of the common era, most women would have been at home, in the field, or at market

5 “R. Akiba says, ‘The one who makes their voice tremulous (i.e., sings with a tremulous voice) with the Song of Songs in the banquet house and makes it something like a song (i.e., secular song, a ditty), has no portion in the world to come’” (t. Sanhedrin 12.10). A later version attributed to “the rabbis,” appears in b. Sanhedrin 101a. R. Akiba also seems to have had a strong opinion on the question of whether the Song should not be considered a holy book (i.e., render the hands unclean): R. Akiba said: Far be it! No man in Israel disputed about the Song of Songs [saying] that it does not render unclean the hands. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the writings are holy but the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy (m. Yadayim 3.5).

6 The rabbinic “study house” or academy appears to refer to a group of students who study with a particular rabbi rather than a specific place or building.

7 Judith Hauptman argues that women “entered” rabbinic discourse through conversations with their husbands (Judith Hauptman 2010).

8 Catherine Hezser 1997.

rather than at public events. As time progressed and rabbinic Judaism flourished, rabbinic control over women included systematic exclusion of women from Jewish rituals and prayers, and this meant even fewer opportunities for women to participate in public Jewish events in which they might hear rabbinic discourse.⁹ What I had not considered was how women *might* have reacted to these interpretations had they been present.¹⁰

The performance and audience of the Song—from the initial recitation of a verse, to the creation and discussion of the interpretation, to the transmission of the verse and its interpretations across generations, to the redaction of and setting down in writing the verse and its interpretations, and finally to the reception and study of them in print—was, until recently, an entirely masculine pursuit. All of the opinions are by men, the speakers are men, the audience is men; and they are all of a certain kind of Judaism that values only itself. Although one of the hallmarks of Midrash is its multivocality, which in itself demonstrates that the rabbis of differing academies, geographic locations, and time periods did not agree with each other, the interpretations seem to have some inherent coherency in terms of their deep structures and assumptions. In short, I think the rabbis across academies, generations, and redactors recognize each other as people of their own “type” (rabbinic, as opposed to Karaite for example) and are therefore “speaking” to each other in a closed, if not private circle.

This coherency travels beyond the texts; that is to say, the academic study of midrash holds some of those same assumptions about women—sometimes even female scholars themselves do. I readily admit that I include myself in this category; I have been unconsciously manipulated by myself in my own work. Let me explain. Because I seek to understand interpretation within a particular context (historical, geographical, cultural), I am required to disengage from the text personally and use a lens that employs the literary and social scientific models of evaluation. At the same time, to appreciate rabbinic interpretation at all, I have to allow myself to become completely immersed into the midrash

9 So Tal Ilan, after discussing the women who served as healers and apothecaries for their communities but who were then accused of witchcraft by the rabbis: “The ... comments are not intended to obscure the fact that women usually did not frequent public spaces or did not often fulfill important offices. The rabbinic sources had to work hard to bring the minority of independent and assertive women under control, but obviously most Jewish women, then as now, stayed at home and kept house. For these women the rabbinic sources are not only prescriptive, but also descriptive” (Tal Ilan 1999).

10 I began to consider this seriously when thinking about Laura Lieber’s piece on a *piyyut* (medieval liturgical poem) on Numbers 5:11, the *Sotah* (adulteress). The poem would have been recited in the synagogue and is just as inflammatory, if not more so, than many of the midrashim in Songs of Songs Rabbah (Laura Lieber, 2022).

at hand. Using this lens, I am attempting to retrieve the value the rabbis saw in a particular interpretation and to demonstrate how that interpretation operates in a web of rabbinic values, worldviews, or perceptions. This is a “religious studies” lens that focuses on explicating the phenomena of a particular religion synchronically and diachronically.

While over the years I have derived great joy from working on these interpretations, I realize now that I often use an additional lens to study and explicate the texts—albeit one that is shaded over just after reading the text. This third lens is my own reaction to the text. No matter how outrageous, insulting, or funny I may find a particular interpretation, I think my training and my perception of myself as a scholar require that I refrain from writing about these reactions to the text. I have to put my own intuitive sense or my own experience of a similar situation aside in order to engage the texts only in their cultural context or as a phenomenon of religion. Well, in a volume dedicated to “women’s voices for women’s voices in public discourse,” I think it is high time—as a member of the “public”—that I express some of those insights I have shaded over in the study of the Midrash on Song of Songs.

To that end, this chapter which I had originally thought would present a broad catalogue of midrashim that describe women in a positive, negative, or neutral light according to rabbinic perception, now focuses on a few particular midrashim and reflects a more personal reaction on some of the deep structures and attitudes. I show how those perceptions by the all-male “orators” and “audiences” may view women in what I believe to be a strange, stilted, or at the very least “relational” way. I appreciate that, unlike other rabbinic texts, the majority of the midrashim in *Songs Rabbah* are *supposed* to be “approving” of women. At the same time, I seek to demonstrate how bizarre some of these interpretations are when the audience stands outside the male inner circle, and how offensive that “approval” may be.

1 An Open and Shut Case of Misogyny?

Many of the midrashim I originally catalogued as “negative” are similar to the variety scholars have discussed in the past.¹¹ One midrash in particular (1:6:4) not only demonstrates a typical negative midrash, it is indicative of the type of misogyny that is difficult to look past for this female scholar. The midrash draws on Song 1:6, but I include 1:5 as well for context:

11 See Daniel Boyarin 1993; Charlotte Fonrobert 2000; Tal Ilan 2007; also Natalie Polzer 2012.

- 1:5 I am dark but beautiful,¹² daughters of Jerusalem
 Like the tents of Kedar; like the curtains of Solomon
- 1:6 Do not look at me that I am black; that the sun caught sight of me
 The sons of my mother became angry with me
 They placed me as keeper of the vineyards
 My own vineyard I have not kept¹³

The first verse sets up the premise of the female lover's beauty. It is worth noting that I chose to translate the verse as a contrast: "I am dark *but* beautiful." In Hebrew, the same word can also mean "and"; hence, "I am dark *and* beautiful." The contrast is more in line with 1:6, in which the speaker indicates some insecurity. She worries that the daughters of Jerusalem may judge her harshly because her skin has become dark from sun exposure. There may be an allusion to societal or economic class in these two verses, as wealthier women in the ancient world stayed indoors and did not work in the fields. Lighter skin, therefore, may have been valued as a sign of wealth.¹⁴ The issue of class will be important for our analysis of the midrash.

Several word associations and allusions arise in 1:6. Twice the verse uses terms for "looking." In the first instance, the woman asks that the daughters of Jerusalem not look at her (root: *r-ʿ-h*), and the second describes the sun as looking (root: *š-z-p*) at her to assert that the sun has shined upon her and darkened her skin. Unlike my translation above, many translators employ "the sun has burned me," as that is the obvious, if less poetic, meaning. The narrator alludes to "burning" again in the phrase, "the sons of my mother became angry with me." Here the root "to burn" (*h-r-r*) is employed to mean the act of becoming angry—similar to "seething" in English. This verse also demonstrates a subtle connection between "anger" and "keeping," "maintaining," and "guarding" (*n-ṭ-r*). The lover's assertion that she has not "kept" (i.e., tended) her vineyard implies that she has not guarded her body.¹⁵ Of note, almost every other place in which this root appears, the sense is one of continuing anger (Jeremiah 3:5, Psalm 103:9), or guarding against continual anger (Lev. 19:18).

12 Although *sheḥorah* is commonly translated as "black," the sense here is that the young woman has become darkened by the sun (see 1:6). Alice Bellis employs "burnt," but I think this rendering strays too far from the sense of darkness in the word; i.e., to be darkened by the sun (Alice Ogden Bellis 2021).

13 All translations are my own.

14 Alice Ogden Bellis 2021, 103–105.

15 Although some commentators interpret that the woman is talking about not caring for her skin, the allusion seems to me to be entirely sexual. Her vineyard is not just her body in general, but the place of her fruit and ripening: her genitalia.

Contrary to verse 1:5, which interprets the woman as being beautiful regardless of her dark skin, the rabbis read with the undercurrent of 1:6:

And R. Yitzḥaq said, “It happened that a provincial woman had an Ethiopian maidservant who went down to fill [water] from the well—she and her friend. [The maidservant] said to her friend, ‘My friend, tomorrow my master is divorcing his wife and carrying me off¹⁶ [to be his] wife.’ [The friend] said to her, ‘Why?’ ‘Because he saw her hands sooty,’ [said the maidservant]. [The friend] said to her, ‘This is the craziest [thing] in the world! [Do] your ears hear what your mouth is saying?! And what ... if his wife, who is much more precious to him [than you], on account of seeing her hands blackened one time wants to divorce her, how much the more so [would he leave] you, who are sooty and black all over from your mother’s belly [through] all your days.’”¹⁷

In this midrash an Ethiopian servant believes her master will divorce his wife and marry her. The friend tells the servant that the husband will never run away with her because she is Black. The piece operates on three types of “blackness.” The maidservant is Ethiopian (*kushit*, in Hebrew), and so by her country of origin, the rabbi implies that her skin is very dark. The midrash also describes the wife’s hands as being black or stained with soot (*mefuḥamot*). In total exasperation, the friend exclaims that the Ethiopian maidservant is not only black like soot but she is also Black, or dark-skinned (*sheḥorah*) from birth.

The midrash builds on Song 1:5–6 by recalling and employing the verbal cues surrounding the color black and darkness. The woman of the Song has become dark from the sun and she describes herself as “black,” comparing herself to the tents of Kedar and Solomon’s curtains. In the midrash blackness appears again as the servant is from Ethiopia, and the wife has hands stained by soot (i.e., black). The friend of the female servant describes the servant as both full of soot and black. There is also a slight echo of the “burning” imagery that appears in Song 1:6. Ostensibly, the “soot” on the hands of the wife and the servant comes from something that burns, mostly likely fire or ashes from cooking.

16 The Songs Rabbah passage uses the root *n-ṭ-l* (נָטַל), which has a literal meaning “to carry off” but can also serve to mean “to marry,” as it has a relationship to the root *n-s-*’ (נָשָׂא). Of note, the later Yalqut Shemoni parallel passage uses *n-s-*’ (נָשָׂא), “to marry.”

17 Songs Rabbah 1:6:3. I have counted this midrash as a *mashal*, as it appears to be one and is explicitly so in Yalqut Shemoni (Yal. on Nach. 982). In the *nimshal* that follows, Israel is associated with the wife whose stained hands are an aberrant occurrence.

The midrash draws a comparison between the young woman of the Song who has “not kept her vineyard” (i.e., most likely, acted promiscuously) and the servant who believes her master will soon reject his wife for her. We do not know whether the servant and master have slept together, but we may surmise something has happened because of the many similarities between the two women, the lover of the Song and the servant of the midrash. We know that both women are required to work. The young woman must work in the vineyard and the servant works for her master and mistress. Both women are quite low in the societal hierarchy. They are unmarried, unnamed, serve at the behest of men, and have virtually no power over their own lives or destinies. For the young woman, she must do as her brothers require. The servant of the midrash works for a master and mistress who not only control her life presently but will in the future as well.

While the darkness of the young woman in Song 1:5 could be seen negatively (evidence of her low economic stature by working in the fields or the fact that she has been promiscuous and her brothers punish her for it), she reminds the reader that she is “black *but* beautiful.” The rabbinic voice reverses this positive valence of beauty entirely when it applies the same qualities to the servant. The servant is Black but in the opinion of her friend, she is rendered distinctively unattractive as a result. If the man will reject his wife after seeing her hands blackened once, “how much the more so [would he reject] you, who are sooty *and* black all over ...” since birth? Further, the midrash turns what had been expressed only by innuendo in the Song, namely that the young woman had been somewhat sexually promiscuous (“I have not guarded my vineyard,” and therefore my brothers “became angry with me”), to a blatant assertion of immorality, disloyalty, and sexual promiscuity on the part of the maidservant. She is bragging to her friend that soon her master will divorce his wife and marry her.

When I first presented on this midrash at the conference, I gave R. Yitzḥaq some credit for valuing the provincial woman’s position. She seems to be a victim of her servant’s scheming (the servant has figured out how to get the husband to marry her) or her husband’s capriciousness (he might divorce her for simply having dirty hands) or his infidelity (the possibility that he is already sleeping with the servant and has promised to divorce his wife). I also appreciated the opinion of the maidservant’s friend, that the maidservant is deluding herself if she thinks the master will run away with her. But to redeem this midrash at all, I had to forgo many of my own feelings about it.

My first problem with this interpretation is that by connecting it to Song 1:5–6, it denigrates the young woman from the Song by taking her light-hearted, sensual talk and making it akin either to a lurid sexual exploit or to the

rantings of a delusional woman. I find R. Yitzḥaq's interpretation of the original verse from the Song appalling. He moves from the verse into the midrash by reducing both the servant and her employer from complex people to their superficial outside appearances and to their positions or class in society. He takes the side of the elite and powerful against the maidservant's real or imagined relationship. And I don't believe the maidservant just imagined the relationship. The idea that a master would seduce, harass, or rape a maidservant in his house is completely believable because it has occurred regularly throughout history. That women are not safe from sexual harassment at work has been a "given" from time immemorial. That the husband would lie to the maidservant and tell her that he is going to divorce his wife is a falsehood that single women involved with married men hear often as a way to keep them hanging onto the relationship. It never occurred to me that it happened in the ancient world! The incredulous part is the response from her friend. I believe her friend might explain kindly to the servant that she has been deceived. Or she might be impatient with her friend and remind her of the power differential in the relationship and that it is unlikely that the husband is telling her the truth. I am dubious that the friend would berate the maidservant and attack her by using the color of her skin as an explanation. The maidservant is powerless in the situation and the friend, who is most likely also a maidservant (they are going to the well together), knows it.

What R. Yitzḥaq ignores completely is the husband's role in the sexual harassment and assault of the maidservant. Why would the husband tell the maidservant he would divorce his wife and marry the maidservant unless he wanted to sleep with her? This midrash is almost prescient of the #MeToo movement: the powerful man has extorted sex from a less powerful woman by means of threat or promise (in this case promise). My personal reaction to this midrash is that the husband has lured the maidservant into having sex with him and now wishes to keep it going by promising to marry her. All the while the friend is desperately trying to make her friend see the light. But their conversation is stilted and the friend is jeering—as if the maidservant actually had any power in her relationship with the husband or the wife. I find R. Yitzḥaq's depiction of the friends' conversation unconvincing and denigrating. Frankly, I can't really get past the misogyny.

I also cannot seem to get past the issue of race or nationality in this midrash. R. Yitzḥaq interprets the verse from the Song about the young woman being darkened by the sun as her being Ethiopian. The friend makes clear that the maidservant is Black from birth, while the wife's hand is only temporarily "black" from dirt (or more likely coal or soot). In the Song, the female's sun-darkened body may be a sign of not being inside where she is supposed

to be or of being made to work in the vineyards by her brothers, but her dark skin is part of her beauty. In the midrash, the rabbi views being Black or being Ethiopian negatively. The rabbi considers the maidservant unattractive (the husband will not leave his wife for her). And yet, the rabbi also thinks of the maidservant as being illicitly sexually involved with the husband, for why else would she think the husband is going to divorce his wife and marry her? By the time I get to the *nimshal*, the moral message of the parable, in which Israel is identified with the provincial wife, I am left thinking about the maidservant. My sympathies are completely aligned with her! Perhaps the problem with this parable is that most midrashim on the Song align the young woman in the Song with Israel in the interpretation. R. Yitzḥaq's interpretation, however, aligns the young woman of the Song with a maidservant of whom he clearly does not "approve."

2 Other Negative Midrashim

In some midrashim the ancient rabbis echo the prophetic metaphor of Israel as the wife who cuckolds her husband (God) by following after other gods or nations. For the rabbis, the covenant that Israel accepts at Sinai equates to a marriage contract between God and Israel; they view the entire Sinai event as the marriage ceremony. In *Songs Rabbah* 8:5:1 a discussion ensues about Israel's sin with the golden calf and Israel's punishment as a result. R. Shimon ben Ḥalafta asserts, "Ill-fated¹⁸ is she, the bride who disgraces herself in her bridal chamber." Pulling on the marriage metaphor, R. Ḥalafta draws a parallel between Israel making the golden calf while Moses is on the mountain writing down the covenant and a bride who "disgraces" herself in her bridal chamber. The two ways a bride might be seen as disgraceful would be that she is discovered not be a virgin (i.e., she had sex prior to the marriage) or worse, that she is discovered having intercourse with someone else. Israel building and praying to an idol while God dictates the covenant to Moses is an obvious affront against God. Metaphorically, the shamefulness of the illicit sexual behavior that is occurring at the same moment of the marriage is about as damning as could be. This reference is clearly negative about women as the rabbi could have picked another image that would have been either inclusive of men or genderless.

¹⁸ The Hebrew, *aluvah* (עלובה), also means "humiliated" or "insulted," with the idea that the subject should be insulted or shamed.

The sexually active bride I describe above and another “unrestrained” or “dissolute” woman I shall briefly describe here are two of the most blatant examples of negative midrashim about women. In Song 4:12, the young man describes his female lover as an enclosed garden. In the various midrashim on this verse (Songs Rabbah 4:12:1), the rabbis expound on all the ways that Israel was “closed” during their slavery in Egypt. Many of these midrashim retain very positive feminine images of the women of Israel. In one midrash, however, we find the reverse. R. Huna quotes bar Kappara on four merits that can be applied to Israel during the Egypt and exodus episodes. One of these four is Israel’s refraining from sexual licentiousness.¹⁹ As the midrash develops and describes the specific merits, employing quotes from other parts of the biblical text²⁰ in order to bolster the interpretations, we find that Israel is meritorious in terms of licentiousness except for one woman who appears in Leviticus 24:10–11. This woman, whose name is Shelomith, has a son whose father is Egyptian. The son says the name of God and therefore must be stoned to death as punishment. Rather than focus on the sin of the son, the midrash focuses on the mother by explaining that she was the only woman with questionable moral conduct (i.e., having slept with an Egyptian) and so her name is published to make known who she was. She was not a “closed garden.”

3 Neutral or Not So Bad?

There are several midrashim that I have counted among the negative but which could be seen as ‘neutral’ references. One is a *mashal* in which the daughter of a king is kidnapped and held for ransom. When the king seeks to free her, she seems to indicate to her captors that she is theirs, that she belongs to them and that she will follow them (Songs Rabbah 1:9:5).²¹ The king admonishes her to be quiet and asks whether she thinks he isn’t strong enough to save her. Although I have counted this *mashal* among the eighteen negative references to women in Songs Rabbah, I could also make the argument that the princess is afraid, just as the Israelites of the *nimshal* were afraid when camped quite close to the Egyptians. In this respect, the rabbis are not necessarily saying anything negative about the princess or the Israelites, and the entire episode could

19 The term used is *parutz b’ervah* (פרוץ בערוה), usually in reference to some sexual activity outside of marriage or not being virtuous on the part of women, or a man who marries for the sake of having sex.

20 Scholars refer to these quotes as “prooftexts.”

21 This *mashal* quoted in the name of R. Eliezer is based on Song 1:9.

be considered “neutral” with respect to women. Likewise, I counted Songs Rabbah 2:13:4 which discusses the days before the Messiah comes as a time when the young will not respect the old as being “negative” against women. Why? The quote employed is from Micah 7:6: “The daughter rises up against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man’s enemies are the men of his own home.” Although this interpretation includes men in its negative assessment of young people, I have included it with those that are negative about women because women are included in the young and in the biblical verse.

There are a few midrashim that say more about the rabbis who quote them than about the women themselves. On the verse from Song 4:1, “Behold you are fair, my love, you are fair; your eyes are doves behind your veil,” R. Levi asserts that if the eyes of a bride are beautiful, there is no need to see the rest of her. But, if she is blind, one must survey the entire body. Of course, on this same verse and just following R. Levi’s remark is the unidentified assertion that when a woman ties up her hair, this makes her beautiful.²² Although this midrash objectifies women in a callous way, it does not rise to the level of misogyny that we see in the midrashim from Avot d’Rabbi Natan or Genesis Rabbah.²³ Chapter five of Songs Rabbah, however, does take us into some interesting territory. There, R. Yoḥanan says, “There is none so simple that she does not know how to strip off and put on [a garment].”²⁴ Not exactly negative, but not positive either. One of my favorites is on the verse from Song 5:6: “I opened to my beloved, but my beloved was turned away and was gone.” The midrash says that “he,” meaning God, became irritated²⁵ and filled with anger against Israel, like a pregnant woman.²⁶ The midrash operates on a pun wherein the rabbinic voice interprets “turning away” (חמק עבר) as “pregnant” (עוברת). Is it that God is “full” like a pregnant woman, or “full of anger” like a pregnant woman? As one who has been pregnant, I would argue that the rabbis mean both—full

22 Lit. “is an ornament to her.”

23 See Judith Baskin 1999; Charlotte Fonrobert 2000.

24 Songs Rabbah 5:3:1. The comparison is to Israel who was stripped of her vestments—the priesthood and the royalty—by Nebuchadnezzar.

25 נִתְחַטֵּא, has many meanings from “living in luxury” to “becoming petulant.” See Marcus Jastrow 1903, 448d, 449a. Jastrow cites this verse with respect to the latter definition. Note Levy, as cited by Simon: “At first, He treated me with indulgence, but subsequently He was filled with wrath against me” (Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon 1983; Jacob Levy 1966).

26 The reference to God being like a pregnant woman appears twice in a short span of this midrash. In the first instance it seems to relate to the God’s state of being at the time that Cyrus cuts off the ability of the Judaites to return to Jerusalem to build the second Temple. The second instance seems to refer to God’s anger at the time of the golden calf, just after the giving of the commandments.

and therefore angry or hot-tempered from being uncomfortable. I included this passage in the group of midrashim that are “negative” about women, but the reference is really about God’s anger. The unnamed rabbis are not arbitrary in their assertion about pregnant women vis-à-vis God. They view God’s anger as reasonable in light of a variety of sins—that of the golden calf or the episode of the spies—or issues, for example, Cyrus ending his decree for Jews to return to Jerusalem. On that basis, one could argue that the rabbis view the anger that pregnant women experience as justified. And I would agree.

Another example of ambivalence toward women appears in a *mashal* on verse 6:5 of the Song, “Turn your eyes from me²⁷ for they overwhelm me,”

R. Azariah in the name of R. Yehudah b. R. Shimon: [To what can this be compared?] To a king who was angry with the queen and expelled her and sent her out from the palace, to the outside. What did she do? She went and pressed her face against the pillar outside of the palace. When the king passed by, he said, “Remove her from before my face because I am not able to endure this....”

The *mashal* focuses on the first part of the verse about the “turning away of the eyes.” It implies that the queen did something offensive to the king to anger him, and therefore he banished her. Once outside the palace, the queen appears to punish herself by pressing her face against the pillar. The king sees her and asks for her to be removed so that he does not have to look at her. When I first read this *mashal*, I assumed that the king did not want to see the queen because he was still angry with her. The *nimshal* that is attached to this parable, however, belies that conclusion. It focuses on the part of the verse, “you overwhelm me:”²⁸

In the hour that the Beth Din (i.e., the rabbinic court) sits and enacts a fast and the Jews fast, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, ‘I am not able to endure; *because they overwhelm me*. They caused me to stretch my hand against my world.’ And in the hour that the Beth Din enacts a fast and the infants fast, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, ‘I am not able to endure; *because they overwhelm me*. They caused me to reign over them and they said, *The Lord will reign over us for ever and ever....*’ (Exodus 15:18).

27 נגדי (literally, “against me,” “across from me,” “opposite me”). This phrasing appears again in the *mashal* פני מנגד פני העבירות (“remove her from before my face”—from being before me).

28 See Song 6:5 above.

Each example in the *nimshal* clarifies that God cannot remain angry with Israel. Rather, the Divine is overcome with feelings of reconciliation when Israel follows the direction of the Beth Din, when Israel fasts, when Israel allows God to rule over it. Yet again, a midrash that appeared negative or neutral at best with respect to women is, in fact, proven to portray women in a positive light from a rabbinic point of view. The queen punishes herself; she repents. When Israel does this, the rabbis view it positively. But from a feminist viewpoint, the androcentrism of the *mashal* is also unmistakable. The queen does something the king doesn't like, and he banishes her? In public, she puts her face up against a pillar and stands there like a child in the corner? What could she have done that public shaming is appropriate?! And in her misery, the king responds as though it's "all about him." He can't handle her being publicly humiliated so he sends her away?!

As you can see, many of the midrashim I have counted as negative toward women, could be categorized as neutral and in some cases, such as the queen's repentance, one could argue they should be counted as positive views of women on the part of the rabbis. If we recategorize the midrashim with the queen's repentance, the days before the Messiah biblical quotation, the *mashal* about the fearful princess, and a reference to Miriam's name as meaning bitter, as not being negative, we have fourteen midrashim that are negative about women out of a total of 116 midrashim, and nine of them reference biblical characters who are already viewed negatively in the biblical text. That said, the cases are so full of androcentrism, with some bordering on or well entrenched in misogynistic references that they become difficult to elucidate without a personal viewpoint creeping in. Certainly, the rabbis did not intend me as the audience—much less as their explicator.

4 The Positive Interpretations

As noted above, the references that refer to women in a positive light are numerous. Several biblical characters are held in high esteem by the rabbinic voices, and these appear in Songs Rabbah. Miriam is cited by the rabbis four times in a positive light. Similar to her brothers Aaron and Moses, Miriam's soul is taken with a kiss;²⁹ she is included in a list of leaders of Israel along

29 Songs Rabbah 1:2:5. Although Miriam's soul is taken with a kiss, the midrash asserts that there is not a biblical quote for such an action because it would be "unseemly"; that is, it would be unseemly to have God kissing Miriam.

with Moses and Aaron;³⁰ the well, which gives the Israelites water during their sojourn in the wilderness, is attributed to her twice;³¹ and she and Jocheved (Moses' mother) are identified as the midwives of Israel, Shifra and Puah, in Exodus 1.³² Jocheved is mentioned two additional times with respect to giving birth to (or bringing forth from Egypt) 600,000 Israelites through the birth of Moses.³³ The rabbis laud the foremother Sarah for converting women while Abraham converted men to belief in God, and they maintain that she remained "chaste" while in Pharaoh's palace in Egypt.³⁴ Rebekah is also considered deserving of approbation as she was righteous (הַצְדִּיקָה) while the rest of her family—her father and brother—were tricksters (רִמָּאִין); actually, all from Paddan-Aram, Rebekah's birthplace, are considered to be tricksters in this midrash!³⁵ All four references to Rahab (mentioned above) are positive because she converts to being an "Israelite." The Israelite women in Egypt and the wilderness are mentioned eight times. Of those occurrences, two are neutral and six are positive. In Songs Rabbah 2:15:2, twice the rabbis mention that the Israelite women attempted to hide their children from the Egyptians. In Songs Rabbah 4:9:1 and 6:4:1, the Israelite women after the exodus are considered virtuous because they refused to donate their jewelry to the creation of the golden calf. The biblical text includes the narratives of two women whose sons are brought back to life, first by Elijah (1 Kings 17:21–22) and then by Elisha (2 Kings 4:34). In Songs Rabbah, these two women are praised by the rabbinic voices for welcoming, providing food for, and otherwise helping the prophets. As a reward for helping those in need (i.e., the prophets), the women have their sons restored to them.³⁶

Other than the named biblical women, most of the approbative midrashim demonstrate the "relational" categories presented at the outset of this chapter. I review a small selection of these here, separated into two groups: those that refer to the positive attributes of wives, and those that refer to the relationship between fathers and daughters. Certainly, there are myriad ways of cataloging

30 Songs Rabbah 4:5:2. She is listed as one of the "פְּרָנְסִין" (leaders or chiefs) by Rabbi Yossi.

31 Songs Rabbah 4:5:2 and 4:12:2.

32 Songs Rabbah 4:5:2.

33 Songs Rabbah 1:15:3 and 4:1:2.

34 Songs Rabbah 1:3:3 and 4:12:1, respectively. On 1:3:3, see also Deborah Green 2011, 182–84.

35 Songs Rabbah 2:2:1. Laban, Rebekah's brother, will prove to be a trickster in the episode concerning his daughters Leah and Rachel. Rebekah's father, however, is considered a trickster based on a pun from "Aramean" found in the proof-text verse from Gen. 25:20, "And Isaac was 40 years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, the Aramean, from Paddan-Aram, the sister of Laban, the Aramean...." The letters making up "Aramean" (א-ר-מ-י) can be reordered to say "trickster" (ר-מ-א-י).

36 Songs Rabbah 2:5:3.

these references (e.g., those that appear in a *mashal* or those that describe women's actions, characteristics, age, situation, etc.), and my system is not necessarily the only method or even the most obvious. Rather, this is only my initial attempt to organize the midrashim.

I wish to touch briefly on a few midrashim that aptly represent six qualities that the rabbis believe a good wife possesses. Much of the Song concerns the beauty and adornment of the young woman. In Songs Rabbah, we see a continuation of this theme as the rabbis approve of women who *ornament* themselves for their husbands. Songs Rabbah 4:14:1 twice mentions the “chaste and proper”³⁷ Israelite women of the wilderness who used either the well water or manna to perfume themselves and please their husbands during the forty-year trek.³⁸ Songs Rabbah 1:4:2 also demonstrates this trait as, “Israel says before the holy one, blessed be He, ‘Master of the Universe, a woman does not adorn herself at all, except for her husband.’”³⁹

A good wife *follows* her husband, even to the worst places. In Songs Rabbah 1:4:4 on the verse “Draw me after you, let us run,” (Song 1:4) we find:

R. Berekhiah said in the name of R. Judah b. Elai, “As it is written, *And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea....* (Exod. 15:22).” This means he led them away from the sin by the Sea. They said to him, ‘Moses, our master, where are you taking us?’ He said to them, ‘To Elim. And from Elim, to Alush. And from Alush, to Marah. And from Marah, to Rephidim. And from Rephidim, to Sinai.’ They said to him, ‘To every place that you will go and lead us, we are with you.’ [To what can this be] compared? To one who marries a woman from the village and said to her, ‘Get up and come with me.’ She said, ‘From here to where?’ And he said to her, ‘From here to Tiberias. And from there, to the tannery.’⁴⁰ And from the tannery, to the upper market. And from there, to the lower market.’ She said to him, ‘To every place that you go and take me, I will go with you.’

37 Could also be “worthy” (כשרות).

38 On using the manna as perfume, see Deborah Green 2011, 134–36.

39 This statement could also be translated as a rhetorical question. The midrash itself questions what the “ornament” was that God gave to Israel at Mount Horeb in Exodus 33:3. It also questions what happened to said ornament.

40 Marcus Jastrow, citing Friedman, notes that this could also be a suburb of Tiberias (1903, 151). I doubt this would have been an official name, but even if it were, it was probably named for a large tannery or several tanneries that existed in that area—most likely at the outskirts of the city and definitely downwind of the city. It would never have been a desirable place to be.

In this example Israel is likened to the woman who follows her husband regardless of where he takes her. The *mashal* explicitly mentions that the woman is from a village and her husband takes her to a large city. The specific areas mentioned in the city are less than desirable. He takes her from the main part of the city to the smelliest, “stinkiest” area of the city, the tannery. While the markets were probably not as bad as the tannery, they still would have been fairly smelly, crowded, loud, and refuse-laden. The sense is that the good wife goes wherever her husband leads (even if it is in circle, which the parable seems to indicate).

Wives should *love* their husbands, and one midrash in particular drums home this idea. Songs Rabbah 1:4:2 twice discusses the wife who loves her husband. On Song 1:4, “We will be glad and rejoice in thee,” R. Idi retells the story of a husband and wife who were unable to have children. They visit R. Shimon b. Yoḥai to ask for a divorce. He tells them to have a festive meal before they divorce. They take his advice, share a meal, and get drunk. The husband offers his wife anything she wants and suggests that she take it with her when she returns to her father’s house. She waits until he falls asleep and then takes her husband to her father’s house. When he awakens, he is astonished to find himself at his in-laws’ home. Upon asking her what happened, she reminds him of his suggestion regarding taking whatever she wanted and says, “There is nothing in the world I care for more than you.” They visit the rabbi again, and he prays for them. Lo and behold, they become fertile. The midrash deftly turns at this point and states that just as God can make barren women fertile (e.g., Sarah, Rebecca, etc.), so too the righteous can make a woman fertile. The midrash then asserts, “How much the more so if a human who says to another human like herself, ‘I have nothing better in the world than you,’ can be visited” (i.e., become pregnant) then Israel, who loves God and waits for God’s redemption will also bear fruit (i.e., salvation). While this entire episode is to prove that Israel loves God and so waits for salvation, the rabbis have given us a glimpse of their view of true love between husband and wife and the agency that a good wife is capable of. On this same verse we find a *mashal* about a queen who waits for the return of her husband, the king, her sons, and her sons-in-law. When her sons return, she does not rejoice but says that her daughters-in-law should rejoice. When her sons-in-law return, she does not rejoice but says that her daughters should rejoice. When her husband returns, however, she says, “This is a complete rejoicing, joy on top of joy.” Again, the good wife is a loving wife. The *mashal* does not imply that the queen does not love her sons and sons-in-law, but that her love for the king is different—perhaps of a deeper nature—although the *mashal* is not explicit about this.

Loyalty or fidelity and building or ensuring *security for the household* are also important qualities. These are found in the midrashim concerning 7:14, “The mandrakes give forth fragrance, and at our doors are all manner of precious fruits.” The first refers to the “daughters of Israel who cleave to their husbands and know no other man.”⁴¹ Likewise, the members of the school of R. Shila note a *mashal* of a “proper” woman whose husband goes away and leaves her very little in objects and expense money.⁴² Not only does she make do with what he left, she is able to increase it. Both cases demonstrate loyalty on the part of the wives and the second goes even further to show how a good wife can increase the financial security of the family.

Wives are also valued for being *soothing*. This is established in a *mashal* on Song 8:14, “Flee my lover.” A king makes a feast. Some of his guests eat and drink and bless the king, but others eat and drink and curse him. When the king notices these rude guests, he wants to make a commotion and disrupt his own feast. The queen comes to the rescue and pleads on behalf of the guests for him to focus on the people who bless the king and ignore those who curse him. In the *nimshal*, it is the Torah that pleads for the blasphemers of Israel.

All of these midrashim employ images of women with good qualities; but all are in relation to a husband. We have no sense of the women as full human beings, their feelings or their desires. We simply know them in the role of “good wife.” Few of them seem realistic to me in any way. Did women adorn themselves only for the delight of their husbands? Is it possible to imagine a mother who would not breathe a sigh of relief or celebrate when her son returned from war? What would be the thoughts of a woman whose husband left her without enough money, food, or supplies to get by? I ask these questions and then consider the rabbis are just giving examples and comparisons in order to make their teachings about Israel and the relationship with God clear to themselves and their students. These ancient rabbis never expected women to be an integral part of the conversation—and they certainly did not expect a female scholar.

The rabbis hold daughters in high estimation as well.⁴³ Several midrashim focus on the relationship between kings and their daughters, particularly at the time of or soon after marriage. In one *mashal* on Song 4:12, “A garden shut up is my sister, my bride,” the king is away for a long period, and does not

41 Songs Rabbah 7:14:1.

42 Songs Rabbah 7:14:1.

43 The rabbinic texts regularly refer to Jewish women as a whole as “the daughters of Israel.” I have not included these references in my count of “daughters”; rather, I have merely included them in the broader category of “women.”

arrange for the marriages of his daughters. The daughters take things into their own hands and arrange marriages for themselves. When the king returns, the people of place tell the king that the daughters had been “whoring” (unchaste); evidently, they did not remain sealed gardens. The king holds court in front of everyone and requires his daughters to account for their actions. Their husbands come forward and attest that the couples are legitimately married. To this, the king replies to the people, “My daughters guarded themselves from unchastity, and you malign them and degrade them! By your lives, I will judge you!”⁴⁴

Although the king in the previous *mashal* went away, it is usually the daughter who moves away once she is married. Songs Rabbah 8:11:2 describes the king who marries his daughter to a foreigner. His people worry that he will leave them to go and live with her, and he must reassure them that he will remain with them. The midrash is not overtly positive about the daughter, but the people would not worry about their king leaving them unless the king loved her very much. In the *nimshal*, the king is God and the Torah is the daughter. The heavenly host fear that when God gives the Torah to Israel, the Divine will leave heaven and live among Israel. Songs Rabbah 7:2:2 describes the scene in which the king decides that he will hold a feast earlier than normal, because then all his daughters who are married are gathered together, whereas if he holds the feast according to its regular time, only the daughters who live near him could attend. A tradition from the Mishnah (Pesah 8:1) holds that a married daughter returns to her father’s house for the first festival after her marriage. This dictum is repeated in Songs Rabbah on the verse, “Then I was in his eyes like one who finds peace,” (Song 8:10). The Israelites respond to the taunting of the nations by saying that they are like the daughter of a king who returns to her father’s house for the first festival, and “in the end she returns to her home (i.e., the home of her husband) in peace.”⁴⁵

Several midrashim focus on how fathers should treat their daughters. Two describe kings who build structures for their daughters.⁴⁶ In the first, the king speaks in public with his daughter when she is young but builds a pavilion for her when she becomes an adult. The perception is that it is inappropriate or unseemly⁴⁷ for him to speak with her openly in public. She is valued much higher than a woman who may just happen to be on the street. In the second

44 Songs Rabbah 4:12:1.

45 Songs Rabbah 8:9:2. The midrash is placed with others on 8:9 even though it quotes 8:10. B. Pesahim 87a quotes this midrash and the verse from Song of Songs.

46 Songs Rabbah 3:9:1 and 3:10:2.

47 “Not praiseworthy.”

midrash, the king has an only daughter who is “beautiful, kind, and praiseworthy.” He builds a litter for her so that her beauty will be only glimpsed.

In the majority of these midrashim, the father seeks to protect his daughter’s reputation or to keep her from physical harm. In some, however, he simply delights in visiting with her. The positionality of the father-daughter relationship is re-aligned yet again in the following midrash. In this case, the rabbi instructs his students to treat women as if they were the daughters of the rabbis themselves. It is based on Songs 3:8, “Each man with a sword on his thigh from fear of the night.” The discussions turn on the phrase “the fear of the night,” which represents Gehinnom (hell):

R. Menahem, the son-in-law of R. Elazar bar Abuna, [said] in the name of R. Jacob bar Abina: If a woman comes before you to the Beth Midrash (schoolhouse) to ask a question about her bloodstain and her separation (menstruation), pause, look at her as if she was one of your own daughters (literally, as if she came from your own loins), and don’t let your eyes dwell on her, and be afraid of the punishment of Gehinnom (Songs Rabbah 3:7:3).

R. Menahem instructs the rabbis that they should treat every woman who comes to them with a question about menstrual purity and sexual availability to their husbands to be respectful—so respectful that the rabbis will treat these women as though they were the rabbis’ own daughters. The midrash is particularly poignant in that the questions at issue are the most embarrassing: issues surrounding menstruation and whether these women can have sexual intercourse. The fact that R. Menahem wants to ensure that no woman is treated with any kind of sexual innuendo during this meeting, that she is made to feel as comfortable as possible, that she should not be harassed in any way, speaks volumes about how seriously the rabbis took their jobs and how they valued and respected women—real women in their communities. Perhaps R. Menahem is an anomaly; but I remain hopeful that he is not. He is able to harness the image of the daughter to the benefit of any women who visits the Beit Midrash. In this case, the relational position of the rabbi toward their constituents (the women) allows for a demonstration of respect that seems absent in Songs Rabbah by the very nature of its “relational” perceptions of women as only mother, daughter, seductress, etc. That said, on the whole, Songs Rabbah offers a constructive response to the many other midrashic and Talmudic works that view women in a less than positive light. Or, at the very least, this catalogue of the midrashim serves as a healthy check against selectively picking and choosing the most flagrantly negative or positive

midrashim as the only examples of rabbinic attitudes toward women. Many of the midrashim that appear positive about women on the surface are, at their essence, deeply disturbing—at least to this female scholar.

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Singing the Song Anew

Hildegard of Bingen as Interpreter of the Song of Songs

Karl Shuve

Medieval theology was written in a male voice. Men had long established themselves as the power-brokers of the church, and the only ones who could fully claim to speak on its behalf: they were the priests and bishops, the overseers of grand abbeys with their scriptoria, the court theologians, and the masters on the increasingly numerous and influential faculties of theology. It was the prerogative of these men to preach in the churches and to perform the sacraments that structured the Christian life, to produce technical commentaries on the Bible, to weigh in formally on matters of theology and ritual practice through the composition of treatises and the exchange of letters, and to rise through the ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which allowed them to shape official church teaching. They were the ones to determine what counted as orthodoxy and as heresy, placing on their tongues and in their hands the literal power of life and death.

And what of women's voices? We can catch their strains in various ways, though precisely how much of them we can hear has become a topic of fierce scholarly debate.¹ Saintly women dot the landscape of early and late antique Christian narrative literature—as companions of Christ and the apostles, as martyrs and confessors, chaste widows and virgins, and even harsh ascetics. But, of course, these texts were written almost exclusively by men, and even when we can be certain that the female character in question was a historical person and not simply a creation of the author or the larger church tradition,

1 Elizabeth Clark 1998 marked a turning-point in the field of early Christian studies, as she argued that discourses attributed to female characters revealed no more than the gendered ideals of their male authors. Hollywood 1999 makes a complementary point about the medieval world through a careful comparison between Beatrice of Nazareth's vernacular *Seven Manners of Loving God* and its "translation" into Latin by her hagiographer, which demonstrates that her religiosity was fundamentally reshaped by this male author. Recently, both Gillian Clark 2015 and Kate Wilkinson 2015, have attempted to temper this insight with the claim that women may have been more compliant with the gendered ideals set forth by men in positions of authority—but neither is claiming that such textual excavations will allow us to encounter genuine women's voices.

this is no guarantee that the voice we are hearing is hers. An attentive reader may be able to capture something of the authentic voice of female Christians in surviving correspondence—for example, the prolific fourth-century biblical translator and commentator Jerome of Stridon wrote dozens of letters to a circle of wealthy widows and virgins at Rome, and though their letters no longer survive, we can deduce from his replies the sorts of questions and concerns they brought to him.² And we do have several sources from across the first millennium that likely were written in part or in whole by a female author: a “diary” included in the third-century *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*; the seventh-century *Life of the Frankish queen Radegund* by Baudovinia, a nun at the Holy Cross monastery founded by Radegund; and a brilliant corpus of plays, epics, and poetry by the Saxon nun Hrotsvith of Gandersheim in the tenth century.

Beginning in the twelfth century, women’s voices become far more accessible to us through a proliferation of letters, treatises, poetry, narrative literature, and an array of documentary sources. Even if we resist a discrete category of “women’s writing,”³ these texts and their authors share a sense of marginality and also precarity: they are not writing theology or acting in the church as men do.⁴ Their authority tends to be justified by appeals to personal experiences of the divine, not by lengthy study and knowledge of theological and philosophical traditions.⁵ They lack the formal titles and credentials to which men had access to entrench their authority, instead relying on some combination of male patronage and sheer charisma to maintain their right to speak and be heard. They rarely write in technical theological and exegetical genres. To be heard in the church, medieval women needed to find new ways of speaking.

2 For example, in *Letter 37*, Jerome responds (critically) to a request from his correspondent, the Roman matron Marcella, that he send to her the commentary on the Song of Songs written by the early fourth-century Gallic bishop, Reticus of Autun.

3 Sara Poor 2004, xiii, argues that anthologies of medieval women’s writings “invite readers to reduce the complexities of those writings to a unified female experience, which is then devalued.”

4 In my use of the concept of “precarity,” I am influenced by the work of Kate Bowler 2019 who studies the strategies used by women in evangelical traditions that enforce female subordination and prohibit women’s ordination to exercise their own authority. She finds that even though women can attain celebrity status—often by running ancillary ministries in a megachurch pastored by their husband—their authority is defined by its precarious status, since it is linked to their marriage and to ephemeral fame, rather than to authorized credentials.

5 Amy Hollywood 2004, 513, notes that although “some medieval Christian men rested their religious authority on prophetic, visionary, or mystical claims, these were the primary modes of authorization available to religious women.”

There is no one of whom this is more true than the twelfth-century Benedictine nun, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was not the most influential medieval female theologian and writer—when the first women were recognized as “doctors” of the church in 1970, it was Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila who were chosen—but she was by far the most ambitious and intellectually wide-ranging.⁶ The critical edition of her writings in the *Corpus Christianorum* series spans nine volumes, which is considerably more than most other writers of the twelfth century, male or female. She was the first and only medieval woman to publish in the technical exegetical genres of *expositiones* (homilies or sermons) and *solutiones* (responses to questions about difficulties in scriptural texts), making her, in Beverly Mayne Kienzle’s words, the “only known female systematic exegete of the Middle Ages.”⁷ Hildegard also composed two medical works, a commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict, saints’ lives, hundreds of letters to both secular and religious leaders, and a three-volume visionary trilogy, in which she systematically addresses topics in theology. She served as *magistra* of two female monastic communities that she founded to distance herself and her nuns from the male foundation at Disibodenberg, where she had been enclosed as a child. And, quite unusually for a woman of her time and vocation, she undertook four preaching tours, traveling along the rivers of the Rhine valley.⁸ Perhaps more than any other female Christian of the European Middle Ages, Hildegard wrote and spoke in places and genres that were the exclusive domain of men.

The aim of this essay is to consider the nature of Hildegard’s voice. How did she find a way of speaking beyond the limits that were seemingly imposed upon someone of her station? I will suggest that the Song of Songs offered her a dialogical model of feminine speech that grounded her own attempts to find her voice in the midst of a patriarchal medieval European society. In so doing, I am hoping to provide a corrective to a claim by one of Hildegard’s greatest modern interpreters, Barbara Newman, that the Song was a biblical book to which Hildegard “paid surprisingly little attention on the whole.”⁹ By way of refutation, we could point to the fact that in *Scivias*, her first major work, she quotes from or alludes to twenty-two passages from the Song. Moreover, she

6 Mary T. Malone 2015 notes that Pope Paul VI chose Catherine of Siena to represent laywomen and Teresa of Avila to represent religious women. Eventually, on May 27, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed Hildegard as the fourth female doctor of the church.

7 Hildegard of Bingen 2011, 2.

8 For a comprehensive biography and description of her oeuvre, see Sabine Flanagan 1989. Beverley Mayne Kienzle 2009, 47–57, has argued that Hildegard only engaged in two preaching tours—in 1160 and 1170—with a visit to Cologne in 1163.

9 Barbara Newman 1987, 65.

glosses (provides an extended an interpretation of) seven passages from the Song (1:13, 2:3, 2:8; 4:4, 5:1, 8:1, 8:5), which is more than for any other book of the Hebrew Bible save Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, and Ezekiel.¹⁰ But my goal is not to exhaustively catalogue the many different ways that Hildegard interpreted the poem—and the ways are numerous, indeed. This task has been ably undertaken by the influential historian of Western mysticism Bernard McGinn.¹¹ Rather, I wish to elucidate how the Song, which Hildegard understood to be inspired by the divine feminine figure of Wisdom, shaped her approach to public, theological speech, through a careful analysis of the “glosses” on the Song that appear in *Scivias*. As I will demonstrate in the opening section of this essay, Hildegard would have materially encountered the Song as a dialogue, with the text divided into short sections that were assigned to different speakers, many of whom were female. Hildegard’s earliest work *Scivias* is similarly polyphonic. She often yields the floor to personified (often female) virtues, who speak on her (and ultimately God’s) behalf. Indeed, when these personified virtues come to speak the words of the Song and of other biblical texts, they paraphrase and re-phrase them, re-voicing them so that the line between text and commentary is blurred nearly to the point of erasure, and the biblical voices become blended into the harmonious whole of the new vision that Hildegard has purportedly received from God.¹²

1 Theorizing the Song of Songs

1.1 *Wisdom’s Song*

Scivias is Hildegard’s first major work, which she completed around the year 1151, when she had already passed the age of fifty and had been serving as *magistra* of a community of nuns at the Disibodenberg Benedictine monastery for a decade and a half.¹³ The title is a cryptic abbreviation of the Latin *Sci vias domini*—Know the Ways of the Lord. It is a work of visionary theology, composed in Latin and divided into three distinct parts. The work is structured

10 Based on citations and references listed in the Index Locorum Sacrae Scripturae to *Scivias* in CCCM 43A.

11 Bernard McGinn 2009, 281–96.

12 Beverley Mayne Kienzle 2009, 132, refers to this as “assum[ing] the *vox dramatis personae*, extending with her own words what a biblical character says in the scriptural text.” Kienzle develops this insight in her reading of Hildegard’s *expositiones*, but it seems to me far more prominent in the *Scivias*.

13 Sabine Flanagan 1989, 3.

around a series of visions that Hildegard claims she began to receive in 1141.¹⁴ Each section opens with a vivid description of a vision, which is followed by the interpretation of the vision that she was given. Quotations from and allusions to scriptural texts are ubiquitous in the often-lengthy interpretations, but at certain points she will stop to introduce a passage of scripture, which she will then proceed to gloss. These scriptural “voices” serve to elucidate and authorize the exegesis that she gives of her visions. The references are most often introduced by the naming of the biblical book from which they are drawn and followed with the expression *quod dicitur* (“which is to say”) or something similar, which explains the text, often by introducing a paraphrase of the verse that ties it directly into the theme of the vision. Unlike her later *expositiones*, where she dwells on the significance of each lemma or even word, in the *Scivias* her interpretation takes the much looser form of a re-voicing of the text, which is often placed in the mouth of one of the characters that appear in the vision. What permits this free paraphrasing is Hildegard’s broader claim that it is not she, but God, who is providing the interpretation of the visions. Speaking in the divine voice frees Hildegard to reimagine what a text might mean and whose words it might be.

Hildegard draws seven of these re-voiced passages from the Song of Songs. As I noted above, this is more than nearly every other book of the Hebrew Bible—a fact which is all the more striking considering the brevity of the Song in comparison with lengthy texts such as Genesis or Psalms. I am suggesting in this essay that the reason for this prominence is that the Song served as a model of sorts for the polyphonic work of theology that Hildegard envisioned. Hildegard, however, for all her quotations from the Song, does not talk *about* the Song in *Scivias*. Thus, to get a sense of how Hildegard understood this divine poem, we need to look elsewhere in her corpus and also at how she would have materially encountered the Song in manuscript form.

Hildegard offers us a lengthy reflection on the Song in the second work of her visionary trilogy, the Book of Life’s Merits (*Liber vite meritorum*, hereafter *LVM*), which she finished in the year 1163 after a five-year period of writing.¹⁵ Since she began this work nearly a decade after completing *Scivias*, we cannot presume that her thoughts on the Song were always so well-formed. At the same time, however, her identification in the *LVM* of the Song as deriving from the inspiration of Sapiientia (divine Wisdom) would not be inconsistent

14 *Scivias* prol.

15 *LVM* prol. (CCCM 90; 8–9): “When I was sixty years old (i.e., 1158), I saw a powerful and marvelous vision, in which I labored for five years (*in qua etiam per quinquennium laboravi*).”

with the sapiential theology that undergirds the whole of *Scivias* or with her treatment of individual passages in that work. As Barbara Newman has elucidated in her now classic work *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine Divine*, Hildegard had throughout her career been preoccupied with the feminine divine principle, which is revealed most fully in the figure of Sapientia (Wisdom) or Caritas (Love).¹⁶ This feminine divine is that "in God which binds itself most intimately with the human race, and through it with the cosmos."¹⁷ In regards to creation, the feminine is the "immanent divine principle that mediates between the transcendent God and his creatures," and in regards to the Incarnation, she is "the eternal counsel, the absolute predestination of the God-man."¹⁸ Newman thus notes the centrality of "biblical wisdom literature" for Hildegard, though curiously she omits the Song of Songs from the list of these central texts: Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ben Sirach. Indeed, she goes so far as to contrast the Song with the "speeches of Sophia."¹⁹ However, as we shall see, Hildegard assigns the entirety of the Song's inspiration to Sapientia.

We find these reflections in the fifth part of the *LVM*, as a gloss on Song 1:7, "Make known to me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture, where you rest in the midday, lest I begin to wander (*vagari*) among the flocks of your companions."²⁰ In this part of the work, Hildegard has a vision of five different "vices (*vitii*)," who tempt humanity away from repenting. In response to the speeches of each of the vices, a corresponding virtue speaks in reply. Song 1:7 is placed in mouth of "Undisturbed Steadiness (*quietus stabilitas*)" as a response to the vice of "Wandering (*vagatio*)." This verse would seem to be a natural choice for Hildegard to invoke as a response, since the speaker implores the bridegroom to show her where he "pastures (*pascas*)" and "rests (*cubes*)," so that she will not begin to "wander (*vagari*)" among the flocks of his companions.²¹ Hildegard ultimately relates this verse to the vice of *vagatio* by warning against running "backwards (*rursum*)" to the "precepts of the old law or to the ancient philosophers (*per vetera legalia precepta vel per antiquos philosophos*)."²² But this is primarily a long discourse on Sapientia as "author" of the Song and as

16 See Barbara Newman 1987, xviii.

17 Barbara Newman 1987, 250.

18 Barbara Newman 1987, 250.

19 Barbara Newman 1987, 250.

20 *LVM* 5.31 (CCCM 90, 235). Throughout the essay, I will reproduce the text of the Song that Hildegard cites in her works, which in nearly all instances is identical with the text of the Latin Vulgate.

21 *LVM* 5.31 (CCCM 90, 235).

22 *LVM* 5.31 (CCCM 90, 236).

the love that binds together creator and creature—very much in keeping with Newman's assertion that *Sapientia* functions in Hildegard's thought as the immanent principle that mediates between God and creation. This introduction of *Sapientia* is particularly striking, for she does not appear earlier in the chapter, which suggests that Hildegard had come to strongly associate Wisdom with the Song.

The gloss on this passage begins: "Wisdom spoke these words through Solomon (*Sapientia enim per Salomonem hec dixit*). For when Solomon understood (*sensit*) that he had been filled with wisdom (*cum sapientia imbutum*), he would speak to her as he would to his wife (*velut ad mulierem*), according to the custom of erotic love (*in consuetudine amoris*)."²³ In Hildegard's account, *Sapientia* is the source of all the words of the Song, but rather than dictate them to Solomon, she engages him dialogically as a lover—and the poem itself comes to take this dialogic form. It is thus tempting to conclude, as Newman does, that Hildegard identifies Solomon with the bridegroom/God and *Sapientia* with the bride/creation, but this simple framing obscures the way in which *Sapientia* seems to speak all of the Song's parts. Hildegard assumes the voice of *Sapientia* to say, "I spoke in Solomon (*in Salomone*) concerning the love that the creator has for creation and about creation's love for the creator: how the creator adorned creation when he made her (*eam*), because he loved her greatly, and also how creation sought a kiss (*osculum*) from the creator when she obeyed him, since she obeyed him in everything. I liken the love of the creator for creation and of creation for the creator to the passionate love and faith by which God unites husband and wife."²⁴ Here *Sapientia* makes plain that she speaks *both* parts of the Song—those of the bridegroom who created the world and the bride who is creation. The reference to creation seeking a "kiss (*osculum*)" is an unmistakable reference to Song 1:2, the famous first words of the Song's female character. And the last line of the quoted selection refers to the very structure of the Song itself, which takes human erotic love and refers it to the bond that conjoins God and the cosmos. And since, as Newman persuasively argues, *Sapientia* is herself that bond between creator and creation, it seems not inappropriate to conclude that the Song is the quintessential sapiential text—*by* Wisdom and *about* Wisdom, in the dialogic form that most suitably represents the mutuality that inheres in the cosmos.

23 LVM 5.31 (CCM 90, 235).

24 LVM 5.31 (CCM 90, 235).

1.2 *Rubrication of the Song in Medieval Greek and Latin Manuscripts*

This dialogic or dramatic form would have been inescapably evident to Hildegard. The most influential patristic commentator on the Song, Origen of Alexandria, had stated that the Song was written in the “form of a drama (*speciem dramatis*),” which entails “the enaction of a story on the stage, when different characters (*personae*) are introduced and the whole structure of the narrative consists in their comings and goings among themselves.”²⁵ From the beginning of the Christian tradition, interpreters emphasized the Song’s polyphony and dramatic character. Indeed, by the fourth century at the latest, this understanding of the text as a drama influenced the very production of manuscripts of the Song, through the process of rubrication.²⁶ In two of the great late antique Greek uncial bibles, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, we find the names of speakers written as headings in red ink (Lat. *ruber*, hence “rubrication”) at various points in the text. Alexandrinus is, by far, the simpler of the two. It includes only fourteen rubrics; many passages are thus not clearly assigned to a speaker, and the rubrics consist only of the names of “bridegroom (*ho numphios*)” and “bride (*hê numphê*),” thereby ignoring other characters and not drawing attention to any of the action described in the text.²⁷ The Sinaiticus rubrics are far more elaborate. To begin, there are forty-six of them—more than triple the number in Alexandrinus. Many of the rubrics also take the form of complete sentences, which set the scene for the reader. For example, the rubric for the Song 1:4 reads, “The bride tells the maidens (*tais neanisin*) the things about the groom that he gave to her.”²⁸ We can see here, moreover, that the cast of characters is expanded beyond the bride and bridegroom to include maidens, and there are references elsewhere to the groom’s “companions (*hoi neaniot*)” (cf. 2:15) and to the “daughters of Jerusalem” (cf. 5:9). Jay Treat argues that in Sinaiticus, these complex rubrics do more than “distribute lines to *dramatis personae*,” instead “mold[ing] the material into a dramatic dialogue.”²⁹

It seems almost certain that the Latin copy or copies of the Song that Hildegard read would have possessed rubrics that would have shaped her sense of the text as a “dramatic dialogue.” Codex Amiatinus, the earliest surviving complete manuscript of the Vulgate, which was produced at the turn of the eighth century in the monastery at Wearmouth-Jarrow, includes forty-one

25 Origen, *Comm. In Cant.* 1.1.1 (SC 375, 176; ET ACW 26, 22).

26 On *Song of Songs* rubrics in medieval Greek and Latin manuscripts, see Jay Treat 1996, 399–435.

27 Jay Treat 1996, 401.

28 Text and translation in Jay Treat 1996, 404.

29 Jay Treat 1996, 503.

rubrics for the Song.³⁰ Nearly identical rubrics are found in ninth- and twelfth-century “Old Latin” manuscripts (that is, the pre-Vulgate Latin text) as well as in many other Vulgate manuscripts.³¹ The Amiatinus rubrics do not provide the same level of narrative detail, in the majority of cases using the word *vox* (“voice”) followed by a noun in the genitive, without any accompanying verb of speaking. Moreover, they do not dominate the page, due both to their brevity and abbreviation; in some cases, they would be only six letters in length.³² But they would dramatically shape the reading experience by inserting an allegorical interpretation directly into the text. Unlike the Greek rubrics, which only identify the characters as the bride or bridegroom (or at times their companions), Amiatinus and its heirs identify the speakers as Christ, the church, the synagogue, and even Mary Magdalene on one occasion.³³ Given the ubiquity of these rubrics in medieval Latin manuscripts, it seems almost certain that Hildegard would have materially encountered the Song as a series of *voices* (*voces*) of personified, female allegorical characters, such as Ecclesia and Synagoga.³⁴ Given that the voices of these same allegorical figures permeate her visionary works, it seems reasonable to conclude that the *Song* was a significant influence for her work. I hope in the following section to further demonstrate this contention through a close analysis of the use of the Song in *Scivias*, focusing on five of the glosses as they appear in three different visions.

30 Florence, BML, Amiat. 1 443v–447r; for the list of rubrics, see Treat 1996, 413–14. On the production of Codex Amiatinus, see Celia Chazelle 2019, *The Codex Amiatinus and its Sister Bibles: Scripture, Liturgy, and Art in the Milieu of the Venerable Bede* (Leiden: Brill).

31 For transcriptions of the *Song* with its rubrics from two Old Latin manuscripts, see Donatien De Bruyne 1926, 98–105.

32 For example, on the right-hand column of BML Amiat. 1 444r, three of the four rubrics simply read “*vox xpi*”—*vox Christi*, the “voice of Christ.”

33 The one exception in Sinaiticus is the rubric for Song 1:7, “to the groom, Christ,” with the *nomen sacrum* appended to the end (cf. Treat 1996, 404). The reference to Mary Magdalene in the Latin rubrics is found at Song 3:1, “the voice of Mary Magdalene to the church (*vox Mariae Magdalene ad ecclesiam*)” (Florence, BML, Amiat. 1 444v).

34 Beverley Mayne Kienzle (2009, 85), has begun to do the work of reconstructing Hildegard’s use of manuscripts, in this case, her potential reading of certain codices containing works of Origen of Alexandria. Alison Beach 2004, *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), has more generally sought to elucidate the work of female scribes during this period. She highlights Hildegard’s overseeing of the production of the Wiesbaden illustrated *Scivias* as a particularly prominent example of female scribal activity during the period.

1.3 The Song of Songs *in Scivias*

Scivias is a polyphonic text—a patchwork of many different voices, of which a striking number are female.³⁵ And yet it begins with Hildegard's seeming disavowal of her own voice. The first words of *Scivias*—*et ecce*, behold!—dramatically call the reader's attention to the “heavenly vision (*caelisti visioni*)” that Hildegard claims she received in 1141.³⁶ A voice (*vox*) bellows forth from the heavens, telling Hildegard, who is called “fragile human, nothing more than ashes and filth (*homo fragilis, et cinis ceneris, et putredo putredinis*)” to “speak and write what you see and hear (*dic et scribe quae vidis et audis*).”³⁷ The same couplet, *dic et scribe*, occurs six times in the brief prologue, with a further two occurrences of the verb *scribere*. Hildegard here emphasizes her identity as a vessel for divine revelation. The divine voice calls her “simple in explaining (*simplex ad exponendum*)” and “uneducated in writing (*indocta ad scribendum*),” and instructs her to speak and write not with her human mouth or in a human way of discovery (*adinventionis*), but rather “according to what you see and hear on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God.”³⁸ Hildegard thus disavows her own voice, even as *Scivias* is spoken and written by her. But despite her claims to efface herself from the picture, she is very much the focus of the prologue (which the manuscripts term the *protestificatio*), and it is very much *her* voice that the reader hears: God has chosen her and “placed her among great wonders, beyond the limit of [what was permitted to] the ancient people (*trans metam antiquorum hominum*) who saw in me [God] many hidden things (*qui in me multa secreta viderunt*).”³⁹ And she emphasizes that she is an active participant in these visions, not merely a passive conduit. She claims that upon receiving the magnificent vision of 1141, she “immediately (*repente*) ... knew (*sapiebam*) the meaning of the interpretation of the scriptures (*intellectum expositionis librorum*), namely the Psalms, the Gospels, and the other catholic books of both the Old and New Testaments.”⁴⁰ And she emphasizes that she sees these visions while “awake (*vigilans*)” and not while asleep or in some

35 All translations of *Scivias* are my own, unless otherwise noted. I have made good use of the translation by Columba Hart and Jane Bishop 1990, but I have not found it to be entirely reliable, and thus while I have at times been helped by it in working through some ambiguities in Hildegard's Latin, I have chosen to produce my own translation for this essay.

36 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 3). In the massive *Riesenkodex*, which contains nearly all of Hildegard's extant works, a rubricated capital “E” from *et* rises eleven lines in height, with a rubricated “t” and “ecce” floating next to it, each at a height of two lines.

37 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 3).

38 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 3).

39 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 4).

40 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 4).

kind of trance or ecstasy (*in phrenesi*), perceiving them “with the eyes and the ears of the inner person (*oculis et auribus interioris hominis*).”⁴¹ She will affirm these points in a rather defensive tone in a letter written near the end of her life, against the suggestion that she relays these visions while in an ecstatic or unconscious state. As much as Hildegard insists that the visions do not derive from her authority in any way, she is eager to affirm her own active role in their delivery and dissemination.⁴²

I would even suggest that there are noticeable parallels between Hildegard’s account of her prophetic authority in the prologue to *Scivias* and her account of Solomon’s authorship of the Song of Songs in *LVM*. Hildegard has seen “great wonders (*magna mirabilia*)” beyond those “hidden things (*secreta*)” shown to the ancients, whereas Solomon was “filled with wisdom (*cum sapientia imbutum*).” Moreover, just as Sapientia “in Solomon” narrates a drama populated with allegorical characters to demonstrate the mutual love between Creator and creation, so too does Hildegard relay the secrets of creation and redemption through elaborate, allegorical, polyphonic visions that she sees in the “living light (*lux vivens*).”

1.4 *Synagoga and the Song*

The Song makes its first appearance very early in the *Scivias*, in the fifth vision of the first part, the topic of which is the synagogue. The Song is invoked to yield the floor to Synagoga, who marvels at the coming of Ecclesia. It is worth noting before we begin our analysis that Hildegard’s description of Synagoga plays into a long history of virulent Christian anti-Judaism. While it might be tempting for contemporary feminists to imagine that recovering female voices from the past will bring to light traditions that are more inclusive and are not invested in marginalizing the “Other,” this is not always the case. Hildegard’s complex (and, at times, contradictory) attempts to theologically rehabilitate femininity did not provoke an impulse to re-examine Christian anti-Judaism.

This fifth vision, which is among the shortest in *Scivias*, begins with a lengthy description of Synagoga. A gigantic female figure—“like the tower of a city”—is the focal point of the vision, colorless (*pallida*) from her head to her navel, and black (*nigra*) from the navel to her feet, which are blood red (*sanguinea*) and surrounded by a brightly shining, exceptionally pure (*candidissima et purissima*) cloud. The woman is without eyes, and she stands before the altar that is “before the eyes of God, but she was not touching (*tangebatur*) it.” She is adorned with Abraham, Moses and the Prophets, who look outwards,

41 *Scivias* prol. (CCCM 43, 4).

42 *Ep.* 102 to Guibert of Gembloux.

in admiration of the unseen Church.⁴³ It is also notable that in the illustrated Rupertsberg *Scivias*, whose production may have been overseen by Hildegard, there is a look of sadness, and perhaps almost pain, on the face of Synagoga. As we will see, Hildegard presents her as a tragic figure.

Hildegard begins by contrasting Synagoga with Ecclesia—and also, implicitly, with Mary. Synagoga shares with both Mary and the church the title of *mater*, since she is “the mother of the incarnation of the Son of God,” and she gives birth to “children,” the patriarchs and prophets, to whom she reveals “the hidden things of God (*secreta Dei*)” that she “foresaw in shadow (*in obumbratione praevidens*).”⁴⁴ She is thus unlike “that glowing dawn who speaks openly (*illa rutilans aurora quae aperte loquitur*)”—a reference most directly to the church, but also quite possibly to Mary, whom Hildegard elsewhere identifies as the referent of Song 6:9, which in the Vulgate reads, “who is this who goes forth as the rising dawn.”⁴⁵ Synagoga does, however, contemplate (*intuens*) and speak of (*dicens*) this “dawn” in Song of Songs 8:5: “Who is this who comes up through the desert flowing with delights, and leaning upon her beloved?”⁴⁶ Hildegard glosses the passage by expanding on and reimagining Synagoga’s discourse: “Who is this new bride (*nova nupta*), who with many good works comes up through the deserts of the pagans (*per deserta paganorum*), who reject God’s lawful precepts and adore idols, and ascend to heavenly desires, abounding in the delights of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, panting with great zeal and leaning on her spouse, the Son of God?”⁴⁷

We might be inclined to wonder why it is the Song to which Hildegard turns to find a voice for Synagoga. The answer is to be found in the practice of rubricating Song of Songs manuscripts that was discussed above. The rubrications in medieval Latin manuscripts ascribe the words of Song 8:5 to the synagogue: *respondit synagoga ad ecclesiam*, presenting the passage as the synagogue’s response to the church, much as Hildegard does.⁴⁸ Hildegard’s discourse between Synagoga and Ecclesia thus finds a precursor in the pages of the *Song* itself. Moreover, the early medieval Latin commentary tradition, perhaps

43 *Scivias* 1.5.1 (CCCM 43, 93).

44 *Scivias* 1.5.1 (CCCM 43, 94).

45 In *Scivias* 3.1.9 (CCCM 43A, 338), Hildegard claims that it is the Virgin “whom the dawn signifies.” Ann Matter 1995, 153–154, demonstrates that Song 6:9 had been associated with Mary since at least the Carolingian period.

46 *Scivias* 1.5.1 (CCCM 43, 94). Hildegard here has *per desertum* (through the desert) where the Vulgate reads *de deserto* (up from the desert).

47 *Scivias* 1.5.2 (CCCM 43, 94). I here adopt the translation of Columba Hart and Jane Bishop 1990, 133.

48 Florence, BML, Amiat. 1 447r; Donatien De Bruyne 1926, 104.

unsurprisingly given the history of rubrication, likewise assigns these words either to the synagogue or “the daughters of Jerusalem.” There is a striking verbal similarity between *Scivias* and the ninth-century commentary of Haimo of Auxerre, who interprets the *quae ista quae* as the church “going up through the desert of the nations (*per desertum nationum*) out of Egypt—that is, the church was freed from the confusion of idolatry (*de confusione idololatriae liberata*).”⁴⁹ Hildegard similarly speaks of the “deserts of the pagans (*deserta paganorum*)” through which Ecclesia ascends and emphasizes her abandonment of idols (*idola*). It is, I think, important to keep in mind Hildegard’s deep engagement with earlier textual traditions, given how they may have shaped not only her interpretation of the Song, but presented her with a model for her own constructive theological work. Hildegard’s creation of theological works grounded in dialogues between allegorical (often female) characters seems very much to be paralleled with the way the Song was read and interpreted in medieval Europe.

1.5 *The Song and the Sacraments*

We now turn to the sixth vision of the second part, which is the longest vision of the entire *Scivias*, running to seventy-five pages in the Latin edition. In the explanation to this vision, Hildegard glosses the Song on three different occasions. Since the vision centers on the female figure of Ecclesia, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Song features so prominently. And yet we will also note the polyphonic quality of the Song, since there is a different speaker in each of the three glosses.

This sixth vision has two related themes which are depicted in two separate illustrations—the sacrament of the eucharist and its proper administration by priests. Hildegard reveals herself to be an ally of the Gregorian Reform of the church, particularly in her emphasis on the importance of priestly celibacy. Priests are, she asserts, to be “the husband of a single wife (*unius uxoris vir*), namely the Church in holiness (*scilicet ecclesiae in sanctitate*) ... who although she is one nevertheless has many husbands (*haec quamvis una sit, tamen plurimos maritos habet*).”⁵⁰ She also specifically precludes the possibility of women serving as priests, due to their “infirm and weak habitation”; the closest a woman can come to the “service of the altar (*officium altaris*)” is through

49 Haimo, *Commentarius in Cantica Canticorum* 3,6 (PL 70:1069A). The passage that is being interpreted is 3:6, not 8:5, but the line on which he is commenting—“who is this who ascends through the desert”—is identical in both verses in the text of the Vulgate (as well as the MT).

50 *Scivias* 2.6.68 (CCCM 43, 284).

her spiritual espousal to Christ as a consecrated virgin: “in her bridegroom she has the priesthood (*in sponso suo sacerdotium*) and every service of my altar (*omne ministerium altaris mei*).”⁵¹ As Barbara Newman has noted, far from being a free-spirited mystic operating outside of the power structures of the twelfth-century church, Hildegard was a reformist who was deeply invested in the integrity of the church’s patriarchal hierarchy.⁵²

The vision emphasizes the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the eucharist and makes significant use of marriage imagery, with the eucharistic elements being presented as the church’s wedding gifts. The interpretation of the vision, attributed to a “voice from the heights of heavens (*vocem de supernis caelorum*)” begins: “When Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, was hanging on the tree of his passion, Ecclesia was gifted his dark-red blood (*ecclesia ... purpureo sanguine eius dotata*), being united with him in the hidden place of the celestial mysteries (*in secreto supernorum mysteriorum ipsi associata*), just as she also shows, when she frequently comes to the altar to ask once again for her dowry (*ad altare accedens dotem suam reposcit*).”⁵³ We are immediately introduced to the allegorical figure of Ecclesia, who is identified as a bride and whose dowry is the blood of Christ, which she must repeatedly (*frequenter*) come to accept. Thus we see a complex interplay between Christ, the church, the priesthood, and the sacrament of the eucharist, all of which are bound up in the language of matrimony.

The allegorical figure of Ecclesia comes out even more starkly in the two accompanying illustrations from the Rupertsberg manuscript. In the upper left quadrant, Christ hangs on a cross, with a crowned female figure “like a bright radiance” being sprinkled with his blood and collecting it in a chalice. The same female figure of Ecclesia appears again in the lower left quadrant, adoring “her dowry” as it rests on the altar. She sees the elements bathed with heavenly light, which appears when the priest (*sacerdos*) begins to recite the liturgy (pictured on the upper right quadrant). The three texts from the Song that Hildegard glosses are 1:13; 5:1; and 8:1, all of which reference food and/or the consumption of food and drink.

She first glosses Song 5:1—“Eat, my friends; drink, and be inebriated, my dear ones.”⁵⁴ The food to be eaten is the “true medicine (*veram medicinam*)” of the eucharist, which “mercifully wipes away (*misericorditer abstergantur*)” a person’s “crimes (*crimina*),” and the drink is the fruit of the vine, which turns

51 *Scivias* 2.6.76 (CCCM 43, 290).

52 Barbara Newman 1987, xvi.

53 *Scivias* 2.6.1 (CCCM 43, 232).

54 *Scivias* 2.6.21 (CCCM 43, 248).

the Christian away from “eternal punishment (*aeterna poena*).”⁵⁵ But what is perhaps most significant about this passage is that it conveys the voice of the “bridegroom (*sponsus*),” who speaks to “his friends (*suis amicis*)” in the Song of Songs.⁵⁶ We do not merely learn *about* the eucharist, but we hear the words of Christ themselves. Hildegard is clearly motivated by the phrase “eat and drink (*comedite et bibite*),” which exactly mirrors that found in the record of Jesus’ words at the last supper, and which she glosses in the very next passage. Indeed, the parallel would have been especially difficult to miss by anyone reading a rubricated text. In both the Old Latin and Vulgate manuscripts, this verse is introduced with “Christ says to the apostles (*Christus ad apostolos dicit*),” suggesting that the scene from the Last Supper had become embedded in the text of the Song itself.⁵⁷ This passage might also call to mind the Gospel parables about wedding feasts (Matt 22:1–14/Luke 14:15–24; Luke 14:7–14)—scenes that feature a bridegroom and his attendants, and conspicuously no bride. Here Hildegard, likely inspired by the rubricated text of the Song, seems to be overlaying the image of the Last Supper with that of the eschatological wedding banquet.

The second passage from the Song of Songs in the sixth vision is 1:13—“A cluster of grapes of Cyprus is my beloved to me in the vineyards of Engaddi.”⁵⁸ Here the speaker has shifted, and we are no longer hearing the voice of Christ, but of the exiled, yet faithful, (female) soul—*anima*—who speaks longingly of her bridegroom. Unlike the previous gloss, Hildegard does not identify the speaker of the passage before introducing it, instead writing, “As it is written about him in the Song of Songs (*ut in Canticis canticorum de eo scriptum est*).”⁵⁹ Prior to the introduction of the second Song gloss, it is God the Father who is speaking to Hildegard from the vision about the “health-giving freedom (*saluberrima liberatione*)” that comes to Christians through the blood of Christ, which flowed from his side during the crucifixion just as the “grape drips from the vine (*uva de vite sudat*).”⁶⁰ But once Hildegard introduces her gloss to Song 1:13—*Quid est hoc?*—the reader suddenly encounters a totally different first-person voice: “The Son of God, who saves *me*, a soul in exile, by his passion

55 *Scivias* 2.6.21 (CCCM 43, 248–9).

56 *Scivias* 2.6.20 (CCCM 43, 248).

57 Barbara De Bruyne 1926, 101; BML Amiat. 1 445r. The OL text reads “manducate” instead of “comedite.” Codex Amiatinus appears to read *ad apostolus* (rather than *apostolos*), which is grammatically impossible and must therefore be an error.

58 *Scivias* 2.6.29 (CCCM 43, 258).

59 *Scivias* 2.6.28 (CCCM 43, 257).

60 *Scivias* 2.6.28 (CCCM 43, 257).

(*Filius Dei qui me exulem animam in passione sua salvat*), also mercifully gives to me in his resurrection the drink of life.”⁶¹

This passage is notable for the interplay between verbs in the first-person singular and plural. The speaker first appears as a single female character, a soul in exile (*me exulem animam*), who addresses us in her own voice. However, when she comes to explain what she means by her words and this “drink of life” that comes from the passion saves humanity, there is a shift to the first-person plural: “For we (*nos*), who used to be in a state of defect, are now strengthened by the exhibition and the knowledge of the true sanctification of good works.”⁶² And a few sentences later she will say that “we have been satisfied (*saturati*)” when “we drink (*bibimus*)” this drink of life, and she will identify Christ as the “bridegroom of souls (*sponsus animarum*).”⁶³ But when she transitions from description to address, it is once again a singular Soul that speaks: “Whence the betrothed among the souls (*desponsatio animarum*) says about him: My beloved, who is sweet and lovable to my heart ...”⁶⁴ She imagines here an allegorical figure, the betrothed Soul, who speaks to Christ, picking up the words of the Song (*dilectus meus*), but expanding on and transforming them in a lengthy discourse about the sweetness of the salvation that he brings. Again, what we see is not simply an interpretation, but a re-vocalization, of the Song, speaking it anew and eliding the distinction between her words and those of Scripture.

It is only a few paragraphs until Hildegard will again invoke the Song, this time the words of 8:1—“Who will give you to me, my brother, sucking the breasts of my mother, so that I might find you outside and kiss you, and no one there will despise me?”⁶⁵ In the intervening text between these Song glosses, the voice switches first to Christ, who is taken to be the speaker of *Ecclesiasticus* 24:41, and then back to the Father, who describes His own observance of the consecration of the eucharistic elements:

From which also I always observe that same birth [of Christ] (*unde et eundem partem semper inspicio*) when I have the body and blood of my Son consecrated daily upon the altar in my name (*cum corpus et sanguinem Filii mei cotidie super altare nomini meo consecratum habeo*), because through that same sacrament (*per idem sacramentum*) you, o

61 *Scivias* 2.6.29 (CCCM 43, 258), italics mine.

62 *Scivias* 2.6.29 (CCCM 43, 258).

63 *Scivias* 2.6.29 (CCCM 43, 258).

64 *Scivias* 2.6.29 (CCCM 43, 258).

65 *Scivias* 2.6.35 (CCCM 43, 263).

human (*homo*), are sanctified as you eat that same flesh and drink that same blood. For when the priest does his service there [i.e., at the altar] (*Nam cum ibi sacerdos officium suum exercet*), as it was established for him (*sicut illi constitutum est*), namely calling upon me with the most holy words (*videlicet sacratissimis verbis me invocans*), then I am there in that same power by which I was there where my Only-begotten was made flesh without the taint of any contagion (*tunc eadem potestate ibi adsum, qua et ibi aderam ubi unigenitus meus sine schismate ullius contagionis incarnatus est*).⁶⁶

While medieval eucharistic theology posited that the consecration of the elements re-presented the *crucifixion* of Christ, Hildegard's account of the real presence here posits instead that it is the re-presentation of the Incarnation, bringing Mary also into the picture as the source of his humanity, and depicting God as a loving Father watching over the daily recreation of his Son's miraculous birth.⁶⁷

And once again, the introduction of the Song results in yet another switching of voice, although the identity of the speaker is somewhat ambiguous. Hildegard begins her gloss with the grammatically unusual phrase, "The lamentation and prayer of those placed in the church with a most certain faith say (*Gemitus et devotio in ecclesia positorum certissima fide dicit*)," which makes the exhortation (*gemitus et devotio*), rather than the people uttering that exhortation, the subject of the main verb.⁶⁸ I think it is significant that Hildegard has here foregrounded the abstract nouns rather than the people themselves.⁶⁹ On my reading, this awkward phrasing is employed to emphasize the singularity of the expression, rather than the multiplicity of the people. There follows a lengthy address to the "bridegroom of the church (*sponsus ecclesiae*)," imploring him as "brother"—on account of his incarnation (*propter incarnationem tuam*)—to show mercy to "me, a most wretched human who is placed in distress (*mihi miserrimo homini in aerumnis posito*)."⁷⁰ Here again we see the

66 *Scivias* 2.6.34 (CCCM 43, 262–3).

67 For the origins of this theme, see especially Celia Chazelle 2001, 32–37, 142–64; Celia Chazelle 2012, 227–228.

68 *Scivias* 2.6.35 (CCCM 43, 263).

69 Columba Hart and Jane Bishop 1990, 259, have chosen, understandably, to render it in more readable English as, "With groans and devotion and with sure faith the people of the Church say", but this obscures the fact that while Hildegard uses the ablative of means for "sure faith (*certissima fide*)," *gemitus* and *devotio* are nominatives and the unmistakable subjects of the main verb *dicit*. *Gemitus* and *devotio* are thus not syntactically parallel to *fide* and should not be rendered as such.

70 *Scivias* 2.6.35 (CCCM 43, 263).

interplay between first-person singular and plural. Although it was the plural “ones placed in the church (*positi*)” who cry out for salvation, the address is given in the singular. And though it is an address to and about Christ, the figure of the Church (Ecclesia) figures prominently as the setting for this redemption, since it is her “nourishments (*nutrimenta*)” that transmit Christ’s grace. This should perhaps not surprise us, since the rubric for the passage attributes it to “the church speaking about Christ (*ecclesia de Christo dicit*).”⁷¹

Although *homo*, unlike *anima*, is gendered masculine, Hildegard has transformed “humanity” into another female allegorical character in her cosmic drama, perhaps driven by the emphasis on Ecclesia in this passage. Humanity speaks to Christ *as the bride*, but, even more significantly, there is a deeply erotic tinge to this relationship—far more than what we have observed in the earlier two passages relating to the eucharist. *Homo*, in the person of the bride, expresses that in receiving Christ “in the bread and wine of the divine mystery (*in pane et vino divini mysterii*),” she is in this way “kissing (*deosculor*)” Christ—here invoking a term not only from 8:1, but also 1:2. And yet, whereas both Song 1:2 and 8:1 expresses a deep longing to kiss the bridegroom, partaking of the eucharist brings this desire to fulfillment.

Hildegard thus draws heavily on the Song in her lengthy discussion of the eucharist, and while the passages all have in common some reference to nourishment (verbs of eating and drinking; grapes; breastmilk), we encounter a wide array of voices and characters—Christ, the apostles, the Church, the exiled soul, archetypal humanity. The Song’s extensive cast of characters maps in a conceptually parallel fashion onto the allegorical troupe that Hildegard assembles in *Scivias*.

1.6 *Virginity’s Song*

The final gloss on the Song in *Scivias* comes in the eighth vision of the third part. The third part differs substantially from the first two in that over the course of its visions Hildegard describes a monumental building, which represents the church or the heavenly Jerusalem. The virtues, voiced as anthropomorphized female characters, feature prominently. The eighth vision is of a “great and shaded column (*columnam magnam et obumbratam*)” that represents Christ’s humanity (*mysterium incarnati Filii Dei*).⁷² Rather strikingly, Christ in his humanity is described as a flower (*flos*), a metaphor that Hildegard develops at great length from her reading of Isaiah 11:1–3.⁷³ Hildegard focuses most on

71 BML, *Amiat.* 1 445r.

72 *Scivias* 3.8.1 (CCCM 43A, 478).

73 *Scivias* 3.8.15 (CCCM 43A, 497).

this flower's sexual purity, coming as it does from the "intact fecundity (*integra viriditas*)" of the Virgin Mary, and she will call Christ the "virginal flower (*virgineus flos*)."⁷⁴

Though we might perhaps expect Hildegard to invoke Song 2:2 here, with its description of a "lily among the thorns," instead she glosses Song 2:3, "as an apple tree among the trees of the woods, thus is my beloved among the sons," perhaps because she wishes to emphasize the fruitfulness of Christ.⁷⁵ And here we also find what is one of the most clearly ascetic interpretations of the Song in Hildegard's entire corpus. Christ is "the sweetest lover of chaste love (*dulcissimus amator castae dilectionis*), whom the faithful soul takes hold of (*quem apprehendit fidelis anima*), desiring to crown her virginity (*integritatem suam coronare*) with his sweetest embrace."⁷⁶ The speaker here, again, is somewhat ambiguous. Hildegard does identify her as the "faithful soul (*fidelis anima*)," but it becomes clear that her primary concern in the passage is with female virgins, not with Christians generally. Indeed, might argue that there is a conceptual blending of the soul with the consecrated virgin, a phenomenon that goes back at least to Ambrose of Milan, as I have demonstrated in my earlier book.⁷⁷ This is a soul who "unites herself with Christ, after having abandoned an earthly husband (*relicto carnali viro et se copulans Christo*)."⁷⁸ The soul opposes herself to carnal desire (*carnalis voluptas*) and preserves her chastity (*conservandae castitatis*), being "as a wife joined to her husband (*ut mulier viro ... associata est*)."⁷⁹ After a lengthy description of her romance with Christ, the virgin soul then paraphrases the words of the Song in her own voice: "I wish to overthrow carnal desire in the marriage of this man under the shadow of whose love I sit (*Volo prosternere carnalem voluptatem in coniunctione viri illius sub cuius dilectionis umbra ... sedeo*)."⁸⁰

Perhaps to put to rest any doubt that Hildegard is using the Song to address specifically female virginity here, she adopts language that is remarkably similar to what is found in her hymn *Ave Generosa*, in praise of the Virgin Mary, which she intended to be sung by the nuns of her convent. Here in *Scivias*, she tells a personified virginity (*o virginitas*) to "rejoice (*gaude*) in celestial harmony (*in caelesti harmonia*) in the hope of the angels' fellowship (*in spe consortii angelorum*)," on account of its origin in the Virgin Mary, the "star of the sea

74 *Scivias*. 3.8.15 (CCCM 43A, 499).

75 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 501).

76 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 501).

77 Karl Shuve 2016, 109–37.

78 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 501).

79 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 502).

80 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 502).

(*stella maris*).⁸¹ Hildegard continues to say that the “Holy Spirit symphonizes in the tabernacle of Virginité (*symphonizat in tabernaculo virginitatis*), since she is always ruminating on the Word of God and thinks in what way she might be able to embrace Christ (*possit Christum amplexari*) in full devotion, burning in his love.”⁸² In the hymn *Ave Generosa*, Hildegard uses a similar term *caelestis symphonia*, also in a Christological context, saying that “the whole celestial symphony sounded forth from [the Virgin]” when she bore Christ, and in the closing stanza she exhorts the “whole church (*omnis ecclesia*)” to “resound in symphony (*in symphonia sonet*).”⁸³ The medievalist Bruce Holsinger has argued on the basis of a related responsory, *O quam preciosa*, that Hildegard conceptualized the convent itself as the Virgin Mary’s womb, and so we may identify the nuns’ singing as the *caelestis symphonia* that sounds forth in celebration of the incarnation.⁸⁴ It is not unreasonable, I would argue, to imagine that here in *Scivias* this “symphonizing (*symphonizare*) in the tabernacle of Virginité” is also a reference to the singing of nuns in choir. The soul that finds its voice in the words of the Song is thus deeply informed by the figure of the consecrated virgin and by the pattern of her enclosed life of worship.

2 Conclusion

This final gloss on the Song ends with an allusion to the actual voices of the nuns of Hildegard’s community, which, raised together in song, re-create the procession of Christ into the world from the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus not only does the Song of Songs provide a dialogic model on which Hildegard patterns her own production of a polyphonic theology, but also singing provides the material context in which women’s voices call forth God’s saving activity in the world. It is Lady Wisdom who inspires the dialogue of the Song. In the text of the Song, it is a cast of largely female allegorical characters—the Church, the Synagogue, the Soul, Virginité—who reveal the depth and breadth of God’s love for creation and of creation’s love for God. It is this polyphonic structure that Hildegard emulates in her own written work, as she, a woman supernaturally imbued with wisdom, narrates a renewed vision of the cosmos through the voices of God, Christ, and a large cast of allegorical female characters, who

81 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 503).

82 *Scivias* 3.8.16 (CCCM 43A, 503).

83 Latin text from the edition of Barbara Newman 1998, 122.

84 Bruce Holsinger 2001, 104.

appropriate biblical texts (including and especially the Song) for themselves. And she leads the nuns in her charge to sing these new words that God has given her. There is much in Hildegard's work that is inimical to a robust feminist theology, as intimated at various points in this essay, and it is not my intention to position her as a feminist reader and interpreter of the Song. Nevertheless, women's voices, both real and imagined, are integral to how Hildegard conceptualizes the very shape of the world, and the Song provided a means in which and through which those voices could be raised and heard.

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PART 3

The Song of Songs in Contemporary Contexts



Women's Voices and the Cost of Going Public

The Song of Songs, Canonization and Safe Spaces

Anna E. Marsh

The foregrounding of the female voice in the Song of Songs, unique within the Hebrew Bible, has long intrigued commentators. Women's speech in the Bible is generally rare, brief, idealized, and hardly ever reported between two women. And yet, in Song of Songs, not only does the woman speak first, last, and most, she also speaks principally to a female collective. The fascination with the female voice in scholarship is related to the rarity of same-gender dialogue for women in the Bible, but also to the book's canonization—a process guided by patriarchal hands. This essay will read the dialogues between women in the Song of Songs as private female discourse, and then consider canonization of the book as the moment this private discourse “went public.” It will turn attention not to the reasons for the book's inclusion in the Hebrew Bible, but to the results. As the history of interpretation of the Song demonstrates, the transition from private to public discourse is fraught with difficulty. The allegorization of clear, powerful female speech about sex in the Song of Songs disinherits the original female speakers of their story. When women's speech about men moves or is moved beyond the space of female dialogue, their safety and power are compromised. Recent controversies in media and politics, such as those surrounding the *Shitty Media Men* list and the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford are sparked by this same transition from private to public discourse. Recognizing the ancient echoes in our contemporary setting illuminates the durability of these dynamics. Women's private speech, be it a carnal confession or a whispered warning, does not go public without a cost.

1 What Is It and Why Is It Here?

To wrestle with any biblical book is, at the end of the day, to ask two basic questions: **what is it** and **why is it here?** We get at the first by asking about genre, setting, comparative traditions, structure, authorship and redaction. Insight into the second comes by way of considering where the book fits into the sweep of the biblical narrative and ideologies. A book like the Song of Songs

has presented a particular sort of puzzle for interpreters wrestling with these questions. The unruliness of the Song has meant that interpreters have varied widely on **what it is**. This article focuses more on the second question: **what it is doing here** and what are the ongoing implications of its presence and interpretation?

According to Ariel and Chana Bloch, “no other book in the Bible has called forth such wildly divergent interpretations.”¹ Is it a drama, a sacred marriage rite, a set of wedding poems, or ancient pornography? Is it a single piece, carefully arranged movements, or loosely connected fragments? Additionally, the Song’s history of interpretation is somewhat notorious among modern critical readers, amused by the fanciful results of a long line of allegorical interpretations. David Carr paraphrases the tale we tell about our interpretive work as follows:

Long ago in ancient Israel a poet wrote passionate poetry about human love ... Somehow this poetry found its way into the Hebrew Scriptures. Then, in the early centuries of the common era, Jews and then Christians, confronted with such erotic material in the heart of the canon, reread the Song as a song of love between God and God’s people. This misreading was then perpetuated through various grotesque elaborations through the centuries. Those who read the Song correctly as a song of love were brutally persecuted. Only in recent years was the Song liberated from the dark ages. ... Using the tools of biblical criticism, scholars uncovered the original focus of the Song on human love and unmasked repressive interpretations of the past as the misreadings that they were.²

In other words, **thank goodness for us!** Allegorical interpretations, which assume that the text had meaning other than a literal one, often appear ridiculous to the contemporary reader.³ Among early church leaders, most of the readings arise from twin convictions about the Song: it cannot mean precisely what it says and therefore it must be concealing another meaning. The allegories vary but generally hew close to scenes of intimacy, except with a divine

1 Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 29. See the commentaries of Marvin H. Pope 1977b and Roland Murphy 1990 for brief summaries of the history of interpretation of the Song.

2 David M. Carr 2000, 234.

3 Ariel and Chana Bloch suggest that “the political and religious history allegories of the Targum and Martin Luther now appear ‘particularly misconceived’” (Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 31). See also Edmée Kingsmill, who calls the erotic reading of the Song “very modern indeed,” contrasting it with readings that dominated from the third through nineteenth centuries that read the Song as an “exhortation to chastity” (Edmée Kingsmill 2009, 1).

instead of a human lover: an imagined marriage scene with the daughters of Jerusalem as bridesmaids;⁴ the lovers' professions of love being likened to proof of God's goodness; "breasts better than wine"⁵ becomes an allusion to suckling on Christ's commandments like eternal food; kissing refers to taking the elements of communion into one's mouth, and so on. In Jewish interpretation, too, did the allegorical reading of the book retain a strong hold. Despite the rise of *peshat* interpretation among medieval commentators, the allegorical readings were performed alongside the plain readings.⁶ In his comment on Song 1:2, Rashi positions the book on one level as reminiscences of a "woman bound in living widowhood."⁷ For him the allegory is Israel in diaspora, and the Shulamite's pining for her lover is Israel remembering different times in its relationship with God. For Ibn Ezra, the woman's voice also stands in for a collective: "the truth [of the book] is what our ancestors, blessed be their memory, explained, that this book is about the people of Israel."⁸ And in his comment on Song 1.1, Rashbam says:

King Solomon established [this book] by the holy spirit, for he saw that in the future Israel would complain in their exile about the Holy One Blessed is He, that he distanced himself from them like a groom who is separated from his beloved.

These commentators share a stated goal, which is to deal with the "literal meaning of the text" (*peshuto shel miqra*), yet all three preserve various allegorical readings.⁹ As Sara Japhet observes, this is not a methodological failure on their parts, but a matter of how the commentators understood their own categories.

4 See Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome, all of whom reflect on the Song as a work from the hand of Solomon, but position the Song as a "contemplative" or spiritual exercise; on the bridesmaids and kissing, see Theodoret of Cyr; suckling breasts, see Hippolytus (who follows *LXX* *μαστοί*, "breasts," rather than the more ambiguous *דדי* [Song 1:2]); on professions of love, see Ambrose. All ancient Christian commentators cited in J. Robert Wright, 2005.

5 All translations are from the NPS.

6 The evidence of a debate over the Song's inclusion in the canon and Rabbi Akiva's oft-cited saying about "those who trill their tongues" in singing the Song of Songs suggest that the allegorical interpretation was indeed not the only popular approach (Otto Eissfeldt 1965, 485).

7 Rashi holds the allegorical and literal readings together, opening his commentary on Song of Songs with a reference to Ps 62:12: "one thing God has said, two things have I heard."

8 Ibn Ezra divides his comments into three levels (*pe'amim*), the third of which is the allegorical. On this level, the speaker is the *knesset yisrael*, the assembly of the people Israel.

9 According to Sara Japhet, Rashbam's understanding of *peshat* is different from Rashi's or Ibn Ezra's: "*Peshat* is not equivalent to the literal meaning and does not exclude allegory. Rather Rashbam regards allegory as one the dimensions of *peshat*" (Sara Japhet 2008b, 185).

It may also be the case that the fundamentally unclear line between literal and figurative in the Song's poetry facilitated these allegorical readings, but in the end, neither Judaism nor Christianity ultimately succeeds in "entirely blocking the erotic power of the text."¹⁰

While the process of the canonization of the Bible is ultimately quite hazy, a book's inclusion in the biblical canon signals that it officially belongs to the community. Whatever its life was pre-canonization, it will now be interpreted with greater regularity, in light of other books, and as part of a whole.¹¹ Both on its own and from a canonical perspective, the Song excites and puzzles readers. So much sets it apart: it is secular, ahistorical and sex-positive. On one hand, it is a highly unique book; on the other, it is tightly woven into the fabric of the canon.¹² As Ellen F. Davis puts it:

The Song is in large part (erotica included) a mosaic of quotations from other parts of scripture ... The Song is like an echo chamber, and modern commentators have not taken that phenomenon seriously enough.¹³

Davis argues that it is theologically untenable for the literal and allegorical interpretations of the Song to be irreconcilable. If the book snuck in because no one knew what it was, "this must be the biggest religious joke of all time."¹⁴ It is also unlikely that the allegorical interpretations were derived entirely

¹⁰ Robert Alter 2015, 3. See also Ilana Pardes: "erotic power is too great a power to eliminate altogether from the realm of faith" (1992, 123).

¹¹ David Carr and Ilana Pardes (among others) both discuss the implications of the Song's canonization with respect to gender vis-a-vis the prophetic marriage metaphor. According to Carr, the prophetic employ of sexual imagery created "a set of beliefs that may be termed 'a theological marriage matrix,'" which is the very thing that may have made it simpler for an ancient audience to move fluidly back and forth between human-human relationships and the human-divine relationship: "what seems to be a big jump to modern readers may have been a much smaller one to ancient ones" (2000, 245). For Pardes, the Song represents a filling in the gap left by the prophets, that is, how to talk about it when the relationship between God and Israel is in a good place. "Thus, regardless of the intention of the writer(s) of the Song, it had the potential of filling a religious need" (1992, 124). Further, Pardes argues that neither did the canon-makers have full control of this text and what it could evoke (1992, 128). Davis' perspective on the religious necessity of the Song's canonization for the fullness of a divine-human relationship is similar (see Davis 2001, 67–68).

¹² For other arguments of the Song's interconnectedness with the biblical canon (in particular Genesis 2–3), see Edmée Kingsmill, 2009, Francis Landy 1979 and Yair Zakovitch 2019.

¹³ Ellen Davis 2001, 66–67.

¹⁴ Ellen Davis 2001, 66.

from prudish impulses.¹⁵ Allegorical interpreters did not think they were doing violence to the text. This was a well-established, valid, and highly developed method for reading Scripture for many centuries, before the Song's canonization and up to the Enlightenment.¹⁶ As Ariel and Chana Bloch put it: "these men genuinely believed that in reading the text allegorically they were serving a higher purpose."¹⁷

2 From Private to Public

As a reader, I have always been interested in how the Song fits into the canon; particularly in what its inclusion means for interpretive communities. However, in considering the theme of this volume, a stated focus on women's public voice got me thinking in a different way about the Song. I was reminded of a handful of moments in contemporary media, ones where private matters became public with immense consequence. My assertion that canonization marks a moment after the texts "go public"—where the story now belongs to the community—raises questions relevant to the themes of this volume. The subject matter of Song of Songs is something generally treated as private, but as canonized Scripture it now belongs to the public. What does the interpretation of this biblical book have to do with women in mediated spaces today? To the extent that sex, so shaped by public discourse, is ever really private, how can engagement with the Song help contemporary interpreters navigate situations where the details of a sexual encounter (be they positive or negative) leave a private sphere and "go public"?

15 David M. Carr cites Michel Foucault's **myth of repression** as a possible explanation for this view: every generation imagines itself to be liberated in contrast with the sexually repressed ones that came before (2000, 235).

16 James L. Kugel 2012, 22. In another essay in the same volume, Yair Zakovitch observes that before the Song was collected into a whole, the prophets had "granted a dimension of allegory to songs in Israel's anthology" (Yair Zakovitch 2012, 59). He refers to the vineyard songs in Song 8 and Isaiah 7 as examples: "these two examples are enough to suggest that, from a very early stage, love poems were interpreted in two ways, following the *peshat* and an allegorical meaning ... it may have been the allegorical school of thought that was responsible for their being collected and included, ultimately, in Scripture" (Yair Zakovitch 2012, 60). See also the contributions of Donald H. Juel 2003 and Frances Young 2003.

17 Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 31. Though the authors only refer to male interpreters, female interpreters, notably Teresa of Avila in her *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, were also allegorizing in their readings of the Song. I am grateful to Elaine James for reminding me of this.

Early feminist critique showed an interest in the dissolution of the division between the public and the private, the latter being linked with the denigration, endangerment, isolation and abuse of women.¹⁸ More recent articulations of feminist criticism push against this distinction as too clear cut, arguing that the boundary between public and private is more porous. As Rhiannon Graybill notes in her contribution to this volume, all sex is public, and it is never private or pre-political. Moreover, even biblical books that do not explicitly refer to sex are dealing with biblical sexual mores.¹⁹ I agree with these assertions wholeheartedly in theory; yet, the language of “going public” remains extremely common in mass media, particularly with women’s stories. In this essay, I seek to explore this tension and the consequences that derive from that.

On its surface, the Song is a discourse between two lovers regaling one another with praise of each other’s uniqueness and allure. But there are multiple layers of settings in the Song. Though these layers may ultimately be the result of poetic fragments stitched together, their assemblage creates possibilities for interpretation. Commentators have been noticing these layers for centuries. Let us return to the supposition from which Rashbam read the book. In the introduction to his commentary on Song of Songs, he says:

כבתולה הומה ומתאוננת על אוהבה שפירש ממנה והלך למרחקים, והיא מזכרת אותו באהבתו אותה אהבת עולם, ומשוררת ואומרת: אהבה עזה כזאת הראה לי ידידי בעודו עמדי; ומדברת ומספרת לחברותיה ונערותיה: כך וכך אמר לי דודי, וכך השיבותיו.

Like a young woman murmuring and sighing about her love who is separated from her, traveling far away, she remembers him and his love for her—an enduring love. She waxes poetic and says: **A love as strong as this my darling showed me when he was with me.** She speaks, recounting to her friends and young women: **my darling said this and that to me, and I said to him ...**

Picking up on the shifting personal suffixes in 1:2, Rashbam notes that the Shulammite goes back and forth between describing her love and addressing him, but is more often talking **about** her lover than **to** him. He then proceeds

18 See a summary in Carol Pateman 1983, 281. For example, see Iris Marion Young: “Instead of defining the private as what the public excludes, I suggest that the private should be defined, as in one strain of liberal theory, as that aspect of his or her life and activity that any person has a right to exclude others from. The private in this sense is not what public institutions exclude, but what the individual chooses to withdraw from public view” (Iris Marion Young 1990, 120).

19 Graybill, in chapter 2 of this volume.

to read the book as a coherent narrative of a private conversation between the Shulammite and her female friends.²⁰ Drawing on this, and by imagining the kernel of the content of the Song as a private discussion, we might explore the dynamics of private speech between women that are present in the book, and then consider what happens when such speech “goes public.” Of course, reading the Song in this way is a deliberate choice—a thought experiment, the purpose of which is to identify certain dynamics in the public reception of women’s stories, not an argument about the nature of the text itself.

3 Exploring the Layers

The layers embedded in a (more-or-less) narrative reading of the Song therefore can be summarized as follows:

1. The lovers **encounter** one another (1:7–17, 2:14–15, 4:1–16, 6:4–9, 7:12–14, 8:1–2, 8:5–7). If the Song is taken straightforwardly as a dialogue, “the young, in each other’s arms, sing a sensual music, their theme the transforming experience of falling in love.”²¹ If the Song is taken as recounted or remembered, this layer took place at some point in the past.
2. The woman **shares** the encounter with a female collective (1:5; 2:7; 3:5; 3:10; 5:8; 5:16; 8:4). “[The Shulammite’s] love is captured not only in her dialogue with her beloved but also through an ongoing exchange with a female collective voice.”²² She calls on the daughters of Jerusalem seven times, both as a witness to her encounters and revealing a warning that these are powerful forces she is talking about (“do not wake or rouse love until it pleases,”)²³ Note that the man also has companions but they do not speak, and in this reading, male speech is embedded in female speech—reported by women to women.²⁴

20 On this matter, Rashbam says: *עמים שמשוררת הכלה כאילו היא מדברת עם אוהבה* (“sometimes the bride waxes poetic as if she is speaking with her love; sometimes she tells her friends that he is not with her”). Amy Kalmanofsky notes a different pattern in the lovers’ speech: The man’s speech about the woman is in the second person, spoken to her; the woman’s speech about the man is in the third person, spoken *about* him (Amy Kalmanofsky 2014, 149).

21 Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 7.

22 Ilana Pardes 1992, 119.

23 Song 2:7; 3:5; 3:10; 5:8; 5:16; 8:4.

24 The dominance of the female voice in the Song is particularly notable because female speech in the Bible overall is rare, brief and idealized. The longest speech belongs to Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 (seven sentences without being interrupted). Most female speech—even like Abigail’s—is cross-gender (see Heather McKay 1998). Women talk to

3. Next, the knowledge **spreads**. The Shulammite's brothers, having enforced some control of her sexuality earlier on ("my mother's sons ... made me guard the vineyards," 1:6), return and reiterate their concern for "protecting her" ("What shall we do for our sister?", 8:8–10). Between these two utterances, the watchmen appear in two nighttime episodes with a dreamlike haze about them (3:1–8; 5:2–8). Ambiguous as these scenes are, it is here that others learn about the encounter, the private matter becomes others' business, and consequences follow quickly for the woman. "Scarcely had [she] passed" the watchmen when she finds her love (3:4); the next time she goes out at night, the watchmen beat her, bruise her, and strip her of her veil (5:7).
4. A final layer of the story comes when the story **goes public**. In the case of a biblical book, this would be the writing and canonization of the text.²⁵ Through this process, the story becomes the property of the community. As the myriad interpretations of the Song demonstrate, this often results in the alienation of the woman from her story, possibly even (further) victimization, particularly when the content of her story is sensitive.

4 Contemporary Echoes

In most allegorical interpretations of the Song, the end result is that the female voice—so prevalent hitherto—does not **ultimately** belong to a woman, but rather to Solomon or Israel or the Church. This habit of wresting the power of speech away from a female voice—be it individual or collective—finds all too many corollaries in contemporary media. A handful of recent examples from the U.S. may serve to illustrate this pattern (encounter, sharing, spreading, publicization) and its consequences.

other women quite infrequently, and even in narratives with two key female characters, the women do not always speak to one another (consider Sarah and Hagar). When they do, it tends to be about "women's business" such as marriage (like Ruth and Naomi) or children (like Rachel and Leah).

- 25 David M. Carr identifies the **writing** of the Song as the moment the text "went public": "Originally, the Song of Songs was probably designed for entertainment, much like similar love poetry in Egypt. Yet the written imitation of nonpublic discourse had profound implications. For it took a depiction of what would normally be an intensely private exchange and resituated it in the public realm" (David M. Carr 2000, 244).

4.1 *Shitty Media Men*

In early October 2017, a crowdsourced Google Doc circulated among women working in media, mostly in New York City. The list collected names of men in media and alleged a wide range of abuses against women. As with the Song, the encounters took place at some point in the past [layer 1: encounter]. The men accused of violence or assault by multiple women were highlighted in red. The list included instructions on how to post anonymously, a disclaimer that these were only allegations, and a warning never to share the list with a man. The list's creator said of this time, "when I first shared the spreadsheet among my women friends and colleagues, it took on the intense sincerity of our most intimate conversations" [layer 2: sharing].²⁶ At a breakneck pace, the information in the list was disseminated [layer 3: spreading]; it was taken down, partially recreated, circulated widely and then shut down by its founder.²⁷ All in all, it was active for less than forty-eight hours; in the first twelve of those hours, over seventy entries had been added, fourteen of which were highlighted in red.²⁸ The list's creator and contributors assert that the entries were intended as warnings only, not as accusations to be shared and publicized widely. But later that month, the entire list was posted on Reddit [layer 4: publicization]. An anonymous Twitter feed began repeatedly tweeting out links to the list. But the list was no longer aimed at protecting women. Instead, the targets were those who had contributed. The anonymous Twitter feed was directing the list at alt-right bloggers. The list was now a weapon, not against the accused, but against the accusers. The founder remained anonymous for a few months until rumors surfaced that a journalist from *Harper's* was planning a story wherein she would be outed. In response, the list's creator, writer Moira Donegan, identified herself in an essay.²⁹ The following autumn, one of the men named on the list—writer Stephen Elliott—sued Donegan for libel and emotional distress.³⁰ His lawsuit sought \$1.5 million in damages. A key

26 Moira Donegan, January 10, 2019, accessed Jan 27, 2019.

27 Right-wing blogger Mike Cernovich offered to pay for names on the list, with the stated intent to "rid the media of sexual predators"; because he is, among other things, the creator of the Pizzagate hoax, this was not assumed to be a good faith effort. He withheld the names in the end. See Michael Calderone and Jason Schwartz, October 25, 2017, accessed Jan 27, 2019.

28 Moira Donegan 2019.

29 Moira Donegan 2019.

30 Stephen Elliott, September 25, 2018, accessed Jan 27, 2019. In this essay, Stephen Elliott argues that his sexual preferences (his submission and his own lack of consent) mean he is unlikely to be guilty of rape. This assertion was met with significant backlash, both in the comments on this post and in a letter to the judge deciding the case from Donegan's attorney.

component of Elliott's lawsuit was revealing the identities of the women who contributed to the list, adding another contour to the "publicness" of these allegations. The lawsuit argued that the allegations were unsubstantiated, and that during discovery they would be able to learn the identities of the anonymous women who contributed to the list; they sent a subpoena to Google in search of the contributors' metadata, seeking to bring more publicity to the entries, which they allege may be fabrications that are protected by the anonymity of the list. Elliott's lawyer commented that they were "curious about whether the Jane Does were actually 70 different people or ... just one or two women."³¹ Google refused to comply. The case remained in court for more than four years, ending with a small settlement (far less than what was originally sought) paid to Elliott in March of 2023.³² In this example, all-too-familiar offenses meet established survival strategies, the unsettled gray areas of the #MeToo era, the whiplash-inducing speed of contemporary media, and the ongoing cultural conversations about a right to privacy in a digital world. It can be easy to forget that this list was intended to remain the artifact of a whisper network, and "went public" against the wishes of its author and contributors.

4.2 *Christine Blasey Ford*

In September 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified during the Supreme Court confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh that she was "100% certain" he was one of two boys who had pinned her down and attempted to rape her at a party when they were in high school [layer 1: encounter.]. This remained mostly private for a long time, only a select few knew of it:

For a very long time, I was too afraid and ashamed to tell anyone the details. I did not want to tell my parents that I, at age 15, was in a house without any parents present, drinking beer with boys. I tried to convince myself that because Brett did not rape me, I should be able to move on and just pretend that it had never happened. Over the years, I told very few friends that I had this traumatic experience [layer 2: sharing]. I told

31 Google refused to comply with the subpoena from Elliott and his lawyer. See Claire Lampen, January 25, 2019, accessed Jan 27, 2019.

32 In March 2019, a judge ruled that Elliott could not sue for emotional distress. Elliott appealed and in April of 2022, that decision was reversed and the suit was allowed to go forward. The suit was slated for discovery in April of 2023, but shortly before that ended with a settlement. For a summary, see Jane Testa, "Media Men' Lawsuit Ends in a Settlement," 6 March 2023, The New York Times. Accessed 15 March 2023.

my husband before we were married that I had experienced a sexual assault. I had never told the details to anyone until May 2012, during a couples counseling session.³³

In the fall of the previous year, when Kavanaugh was short-listed for a Supreme Court seat, Ford told two friends that she had written a letter to her congressperson and called the Washington Post tip-line about what had happened to her. She had done both anonymously, but feared her name was going to come out: "I've been trying to forget about this all my life, and now I have to remember every little detail ... they're going to be all over me."³⁴ After Kavanaugh got the nomination, Ford wrote a second letter detailing the allegations, this time to her senator, Dianne Feinstein. The senator referred the letter to the FBI, who added it to Kavanaugh's file but did nothing further.³⁵ Between the confirmation hearing and vote, Feinstein made a public statement about the allegations with Ford's name protected and the Senate Judiciary Committee got an updated copy of Kavanaugh's file [layer 3: spreading].³⁶ Kavanaugh issued a denial. On September 16, 2018, Ford "went public," taking her story to the media [layer 4: publicization].³⁷ The vote was delayed and a hearing was scheduled

33 From Ford's testimony, 26 September 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/26/christine-blasey-ford-opening-statement-senate-845080>, accessed Apr 19, 2019. Ford also relates that she shared the process of deciding to go public with several friends: I immediately felt compelled that I needed to say something. I just didn't know how or to whom. And so the people I started with were my friends ... for six weeks, I would sit on the beach and talk with my friends about what to do" (Marissa Lagos and Kate Wolfe February 11, 2020, accessed Dec 22, 2020).

Her husband recalls her naming Kavanaugh and saying that her attacker was now a federal judge. A friend shares this memory as well, recalling that after the short list was announced, Ford had emailed him, saying, "the favorite for SCOTUS is the jerk who assaulted me in high school. He's my age so he'll be on the court for the rest of my life." He responded, "I remember you telling me about this. Can you remind me what his name is?" Michael Barbaro, October 4, 2019.

34 Williamson et al., September 19, 2018, accessed Jan 28, 2019.

35 Journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey relate the long and drawn-out process of Ford's decision to testify, in chapter 8 (189–210) of their 2019 book which chronicles their investigation into the allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein; they report that it was not until Ford sent the second letter (to Feinstein) that it occurred to her she would need a lawyer.

36 Copies of Ford's letter were apparently also obtained by CNN and The Intercept, according to a timeline of the accusations assembled by PBS NewsHour: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/how-the-sexual-assault-accusation-against-kavanaugh-unfolded-in-one-timeline>, accessed Apr 17, 2019.

37 The decision was not made without considerable pressure. The week the hearings began, Ford returned to campus and was approached there and at home by reporters.

where both would testify. In her testimony, Ford recounted the experience in vivid detail. She opened her statement with the words, “I am here today not because I want to be. I am terrified. I am here because I believe it is my civic duty to tell you what happened to me.”³⁸ In the end, Kavanaugh’s nomination went through and he was confirmed to the Supreme Court the following month. Meanwhile, the consequences for Ford’s daily life have been severe. More than one time, Ford has been “doxed”: her personal information, including her address, has been posted online. According to National Public Radio coverage in November 2018, in the intervening time since her testimony two months prior, Ford has moved four times, she and her husband have been living apart from their two children, and she has been paying for a private security detail, continues to receive threats, and currently has no timetable for returning to her job as a professor of psychology.³⁹ “The spotlight has receded, but the danger has not,” says her lawyer.⁴⁰

These media moments are only two examples showing the public sphere, in particular mediated and politicized spaces, to be a place of vulnerability and threat for women sharing stories of a sensitive nature. Many, many more exist. In the case of the *Shitty Media Men* list, it was not the lawsuit but the **publication** of the list that those involved refer to as “weaponization.”⁴¹ Perhaps because those involved are all too familiar with what can happen to women in mediated spaces. Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian’s name is

On September 12, the Intercept published an article signaling that the Democrats were aware of an allegation against Kavanaugh. Senator Feinstein confirms this but states that her constituent had requested confidentiality. As Kantor and Twohey report, “all of these external forces are coming into play that are acting to take her story out of her own hands; in this moment, she thinks, ‘it looks like my best course of action is to actually tell my story to the Washington Post’” (Michael Barbaro, October 4, 2019).

38 Ford’s testimony drew parallels and contrasts with that of Anita Hill in 1991, during the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. In both cases, the act of going public was questioned, despite their personal accounts of how they came to their decision, and in both cases the women’s lives were seriously disrupted without changing the outcome of the confirmation. Kantor and Twohey recount advice to Ford from democratic strategist Ricki Seidman. She had advised Hill to come forward in 1991 and had been conflicted about it ever since, having seen the personal cost Hill had paid. Seidman advised Ford against going public (Michael Barbaro, October 4, 2019).

39 Ford states that this is the response she expected: “As psychologists and sociologists, we expect that survivors of sexual assault will experience what we call DARVO,” an acronym that stands for **denial** by the accused, **attack** the accuser, and then **recast** the **victim** as the **offender** (“I expected attacks”: <https://www.kqed.org/news/1180137/christine-blasey-ford-i-expected-attacks-but-felt-compelled-to-share-kavanaugh-story>, accessed Apr 17, 2019).

40 See Tim Mak, November 8, 2018, accessed April 17, 2019.

41 Madison M. Kircher, October 27, 2017, accessed Apr 17, 2019.

practically synonymous with internet harassment because of a coordinated attack of which she was the target in 2009.⁴² Female celebrities are regularly threatened with the release of private photos from hacked phones: these photos were—theoretically—taken and shared consensually during an encounter with a sexual partner, generally sold (spread) and published without consent.

The threat of private information “going public” is leveraged in many directions. As detailed in 2019 books by journalists Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor (*She Said*) and Ronan Farrow (*Catch and Kill*) about the work required to break open the case against film producer Harvey Weinstein, the durability of the systems that protect abusers and perpetuate harassment and assault is formidable.⁴³ Both releases document decades of alleged sexual offenses against women, and the way Weinstein’s media company and the professional network he had built up around himself were leveraged to perpetuate his actions while shielding him from accountability. The tools brought to this fight ranged from widely-used non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) signed at the behest of the employer, to lawyers who would counsel accusers against “going public.” The actress Rose McGowan reports that she was told by a lawyer, “no one will believe you. You’re an actress and you’ve done a sex scene.”⁴⁴ A storyline in season 2 of the HBO series *Succession* presents a fictionalization of this. The series revolves around a media mogul (loosely patterned after Rupert Murdoch), his three adult children and the family’s constant scheming and backstabbing to secure control of the family’s media empire. In the midst of a multi-day hearing before Congress on corruption and abuse within the company, the family learns that a woman with an account of sexual harassment is prepared to step forward. The daughter, Siobhan (“Shiv”) is sent to talk to the witness (Kira). Here is their dialogue:

Shiv: I’m not here to stop you testifying. And I’m not here to offer you anything. I’m here to listen and to try to understand.

Kira: Well it’s a very convenient time to try to show up wanting to understand.

Shiv: I think you’re brave.

Kira: Well, thank you.

42 “How Feminist Blogger Anita Sarkeesian Fights Trolls,” 2018, *Washington Post*, The Lily, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lS1-k3SNhE accessed May 4, 2019; on celebrity photo releases, see the case of actress Emma Watson following a speech on women’s rights in her role as the U.N. Women Goodwill Ambassador; the threat ended up being a multilayered hoax (see Abby Phillip, September 24, 2014, accessed August 17, 2022).

43 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey 2019; Ronan Farrow 2019.

44 Ronan Farrow, 28 February 2020.

- Shiv: It's just ... is this the right forum?
- Kira: Okay, here it comes.
- Shiv: Nope. Honestly? A better question. What do you actually want to happen?
- Kira: I want people to hear what Lester was like. How he treated me and the other women ...
- Shiv: Hey, the good thing is, you're going to have a lot of people on your side, who will sing your name and back you up.
- Kira: Yeah.
- Shiv: But the other people, the other side, the normal people? They will doubt you. They'll say terrible things. They'll call you a slut and a whore and a money-grubber. Your life is going to get ripped apart. Your home? You'll wanna move out. For two or three days you're going to be kind of famous. But then the caravan moves on.
- Kira: I just think it's what I have to do.
- Shiv: Yeah, true. No, I get it. That's good. But from tomorrow, that's ... all you'll ever be. To your grandkids, to the people you meet on vacation. When they Google you. Pages and pages of filth and lies. First line of your obituary, last line.
- Kira: Uh-huh.⁴⁵

The witness drops out for “personal reasons” and Shiv is congratulated by the patriarch for doing what was necessary to help the family. An episode such as this is dramatized in a popular television series because it portrays enduring dynamics of women's public accounts of sexual encounters. At the same time, the choice to “go public” also does not always belong to the woman, as in the case of former California House Representative Katie Hill, whose ex-husband allegedly sold photos of Hill engaged in consensual sexual activity prior to their separation to right-wing media outlets.⁴⁶ The publication

45 HBO's *Succession*, Season 2, “D.C.” Original air date, October 6, 2019.

46 Hill alleges that her ex-husband posted nude photos of her engaged in consensual sexual activities with a third partner—a young woman with whom the couple had been maintaining a sexual relationship—but that some of the photos were taken without her knowledge, and they were all were shared and/or sold without her consent as retaliation for her ending the marriage and having an affair. In her farewell address to the U.S. House in November 2019, Hill said: “I am leaving because of a misogynistic culture that gleefully consumed my naked pictures, capitalized on my sexuality and enabled my abusive ex to continue that abuse, this time with the entire country watching” (Jessica Bennet, November 1, 2019).

of the photos compromised her political career; Hill resigned from Congress in November 2019 under the shadow of the scandal, and has since devoted energy to strengthening protections around “cyber-exploitation,” which is how she classifies the images of her that her ex-husband shared without her consent.⁴⁷ Accounts such as these—in real life or fiction—are at the heart of the #MeToo Movement. A common thread in many of the alleged encounters is a sense of fear or anxiety about the account moving from a private space to the public sphere. Indeed, it is difficult to find examples of allegations of sexual misconduct where the accuser is not further victimized in the process of coming forward.

5 Conclusions

What do these examples have to do with the Song? The parallels are not always precise, and it is important to note where the ancient and contemporary examples do not align. First and foremost, the contemporary media moments I have discussed are all examples of alleged assault, while the Shulammitte's account is predominantly (and importantly) positive in tone.⁴⁸ Second, the Song is figurative, an imagined or poeticized account, while the contemporary examples are instances of (alleged) real-life experiences. Finally, the Song—as ancient poetry preserved through performance and written transmission—was probably always intended to have an audience. By contrast, the media men list was never intended to go public; Christine Blasey Ford shared her experience after much deliberation and then only out of what she called a sense of “duty”. Within the biblical text, the Shulammitte wants to be in the open (7:1; 8:2), but

47 Hill prefers this term to the more common “revenge porn,” which she argues centers the emotional motivation and voyeuristic experience of the male consumer (Adrian Daub and Laura Goode, hosts, 21 October 2020, “Katie Hill,” *The Feminist Present*).

48 Several commentators have noted the abusive aspects of the relationship outlined in the Song. This ongoing debate is summarized by Ilana Pardes, referring to Phyllis Trible: “Trible, who treats the Song as if it were a representation of a harmonic ‘garden’ of wish-fulfillment where the loves enjoy sex and wander about naked ‘without shame or fear,’ fails to see not only the lack of fulfillment in the text but also its non-idyllic representation of love, the anxiety and shame that accompany the pleasures of exposure, especially when a female body is at stake” (Ilana Pardes 1992, 137). Recognizing the joyful exuberance in the Song's description of sexual intimacy remains deeply important because it truly sets the Song apart in the context of the biblical canon. The Shulammitte's is a story where there is oppression, yes, but mostly she is *not* oppressed, and ignoring the positivity in her account blunts the power of the Song.

her refrain does show reticence. Her words to her female friends—the first sounding board of her encounter—are a recounting and then a warning:

His left hand was under my head,
 His right arm embraced me.
 I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem,
 ... do not wake or rouse
 Love until it please!⁴⁹

Perhaps this demonstrates a sense that the forces of love, desire, sex and power remain largely beyond our control.

My argument here is not built on focusing on the two scenes of abuse **within** the text and extracting a negative reading of the Song because of their presence, but rather on noticing similarities between the afterlife of this ancient text and these contemporary media moments, similarities which become observable **at some point later**. Biblical texts become public through the dual processes of writing and canonization, and it is through these—particularly the latter—that others begin to have a say as to what a story means and how to respond to it. Though it could be said that the process of separating the Song from its female voice began with the inscription in 1:1 (*šîr haššîrîm ’ăšer lišlômô* [“the song of songs, which is Solomon’s”]), I argue that it was less in the writing that the female voice was suppressed than in the spreading and sharing.⁵⁰ Whether the encounter was a positive or negative one—or one more difficult to define—a durable dynamic is sadly identifiable. Once a narrative is wrested from a woman for mass consumption, her interests are excised from her own story and her account becomes fair game as a point of reference for anyone participating in the public discourse surrounding her. The distinction between public and private, particularly around sex, seems dismayingly fixed. Perhaps more than anything this demonstrates the tendency of the mass mediated public sphere, which has an aptitude for weaponizing the accounts of women, to revert our discourse to older, more rigid distinctions between categories. As such, a reparative reading of the Song may be even more within our grasp than a healing narrative of female sexuality in contemporary media.

49 Song 2:6–7, NJPS.

50 Incisive reflections on gender and voice in biblical texts can be found in Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes 1993. Of particular interest for how the female voice in a literary text may be shaped by the dominant culture is Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes’ application of feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter’s concepts of “mutedness” and “double-voice” to texts in the Hebrew Bible (see 25–29). However, their focus remains primarily on the composition of biblical texts, not on their transmission and canonization.

Whisper networks exist in every industry: fashion, music, academia, architecture; these warnings have been around for ages.⁵¹ While these networks are just as “elitist, insular, and prone to exclude women of color” as the industries they are discussing, formats like a crowdsourced document at least offer a promise the possibility of wider access in terms of both geography and status.⁵² And they exist because official pathways have failed survivors more often than not.⁵³ Typically, these networks have been aimed at private warnings rather than public accountability. Of the Shitty Media Men list, Moira Donegan has said:

I was incredibly naïve when I made the spreadsheet. I was naïve because I did not understand the forces that would make the document go viral. I was naïve because I thought that the document would not be made public, and when it became clear that it would be, I was naïve because I thought that the focus would be on the behavior described in the document, rather than on the document itself. It is hard to believe, in retrospect, that I really thought this. But I did.⁵⁴

For now, these intermediary spaces will remain necessary for processing warning, frustration, helplessness, empowerment, safety, and possibly survival or healing.⁵⁵ But there is something unruly about them. They remind us that a story has an entire life, and has shaped entire lives, before it goes public.

Whatever we know about the canonization process of the Song of Songs, it is likely true that the text had already been claimed by the community before any canonical imprimatur was put on it. Focusing our attention on the conversation between women in the Song invites us as interpreters to reflect on the multiple purposes served by these intermediary spaces. In her book *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible*, Amy Kalmanofsky suggests that the Song may

51 Collecting and sharing information via Google Docs has become a powerful tool for organizing and advocacy, particularly in the wake of the 2016 U.S. election. Crowdsourcing tweets to raise awareness, spreading information on town hall events and sharing vital information in the wake of natural disasters. Examples include the “OH CRAP!” list or Grab Your Wallet. On this phenomenon, see Ann Friedman, October 23, 2017, accessed May 3, 2019.

52 Moira Donegan, 2019.

53 In the dust up surrounding the Media Men list, several others went public. A very limited set of examples includes: “Shitty Architecture Men,” “The Industry Ain’t Safe” (music), the “Blacklist” (fashion), “Sexual Harassment in the Academy” (academia), the University of Washington’s list “Make Them Scared” and “The Rape List” at Brown University.

54 Moira Donegan, 2019.

55 See Anne Helen Petersen, April 16, 2019, accessed May 3, 2019.

provide “the most direct access into the social and emotional universe inhabited by biblical women. It preserves the voice of a sisterhood in the Bible.”⁵⁶ It is in the sisterhood that the Shulammitte learns to express her feelings, stake her claim, and express her desire:

We observe a pattern in the Song: When the lovers draw physically close to one another, the Shulammitte turns to the daughters of Jerusalem and immerses herself in their company. By doing this, she simultaneously seeks the emotional support of her sisterhood while establishing a safe distance between herself and her lover. This distance prevents the lovers from consummating their relationship and protects the Shulammitte’s purity, thereby upholding the Bible’s patriarchal values and expectations.⁵⁷

These spaces are not uncomplicated, but they are necessary, serving a specific function in a male-privileging society.⁵⁸ They are a survival mechanism.

And yet, the public sphere is not exclusively a place of vulnerability and threat. Sometimes going public, even if painful and disempowering at times, can bring about new possibilities. The presence in the Bible of the Song’s attitude toward sexuality has been a gift, as has a book where the male voice is not the dominant one. In our contemporary examples, note that Christine Blasey Ford’s first public appearance after her testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee was by video in December 2018, when she presented the *Sports Illustrated* award for “Inspiration of the Year” to Rachael Denhollander, the first gymnast to come forward with accusations of sexual abuse against Dr. Larry Nassar. Three hundred women followed her lead.⁵⁹ Both Ford and Donegan have seen the support of thousands of strangers through pages established to help them with legal and security costs associated with the fallout of their going public.

56 Amy Kalmanofsky, 2014, 142.

57 Amy Kalmanofsky 2014, 144.

58 There are hints that the daughters of Jerusalem may be jealous of the Shulammitte. Japhet cites Rashbam’s comment that they encourage her to leave him in her memory, likening the daughters of Jerusalem to Christians antagonizing the Jewish community of Rashbam’s time (192). In chapter 6 of this volume, Martti Nissinen highlights the presence of a female collective in the Akkadian love poetry as well, though they are more competitive with the “beloved” than is seen in the Song.

59 Kate Sullivan, December 12, 2018, accessed April 18, 2019.

I remain convinced that it is the work of responsible interpreters to be mindful of how durable dynamics such as these impact traditionally marginalized voices in the canon. More recent sex-positive readings of the Song have done a great deal to restore the Shulammite's voice to her; she merely had to wait a long time. Ultimately, I still assert that the Song presents a positive, decidedly untraditional (in biblical terms) vision of sexuality, one that is joyful and exuberant is its expression. Its inclusion in the biblical canon is a joy and a bit of a mystery. Interpreters have a responsibility to be aware of these dynamics in all of their complexity as we work with texts that belong to so many. The Shulammite's story becoming the story of many communities is not a negative development by any stretch of imagination. Neither did the interpreters I have singled out necessarily have an expressly sexist or misogynist intent. It seems more likely that it simply that it didn't occur to them that an allegorical reading intended to draw a community closer to God would have had the effect of sidelining one of the strongest female voices in biblical literature. But, intentional or not, the transition from private to public spaces rarely happens without cost.

Readers often refer to the young woman in the Song as "a lover" or "beloved," but she is also a victim of abuse; her body is policed and brutalized by men who feel they have a right to control her. Given this aspect of the text, how we as readers and interpreters treat her voice takes on a greater importance. The Shulammite can add her voice to a chorus—along with Christine, Emma, Anita, Moira and so many others—reminding us that these are powerful forces, and we do not always know what will happen when we rouse them. These stories are far from isolated incidents, as the hashtags #yesallwomen, #notokay, #metoo, #timesup, and #whyididntreport sadly attest. When someone calls out, "let me hear your voice," women—along with others whose voices have been pushed to the margins—must do complicated calculus about whether or not it is safe, and whether or not it is worth the risk.

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The Gendering of Sexual Agency

Case Studies from Song of Songs 8:5–14 and an Infamous Indian Trial

Havilah Dharamraj

One half of a phone conversation about the gendering of sexual agency—that’s what the Song of Songs is. We’ve missed it because our ears have been listening to the *other* half of the phone conversation. Say, for instance to, Leviticus 18 and 20. These are chapters in Old Testament canon law that give generous footage to the question of who may not lie with whom. It’s a Mr. Who and a Ms. Whom. Mr. Who may not lie with his mother, his father’s (other) wife, sister or half-sister, grand-daughter, either paternal or maternal aunt, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law. When the list has exhausted all possible female sexual partners within a typical “joint family” (an extended family living together), it finishes with an injunction against sleeping with the neighbor’s wife, against homosexuality and against bestiality.

The female reader of these texts is struck by this thought: The man who didn’t care about keeping the law could choose between quite a few options, couldn’t he, if sex outside marriage was on his mind. All of them low-hanging fruit, even. The law seems to assume that the woman needs no legislation against improper sexual relations. Only, she is asked not to “present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it” (Lev 18:23b, 20:16).¹ It looks suspiciously like the text is confident that the woman is socially conditioned against sexual agency, at least, as far as it concerns *human* males. Indeed, the woman who decides whom she will lie with is a rare species²—until we meet the female protagonist of the Song. This lady not only makes her choice on with whom she lies (4:16; 8:12), but also where (1:4; 3:4; 8:2) and when (6:11–12). So, here is a pair of texts that is a good instance of the Old Testament’s intriguing use of polyphony, that is, the use of multiple voices to complete the conversation on a given topic: while the legal canon assumes that women are relatively

¹ All translations are taken from NIV 2011.

² The instances of such women is, largely, morally dubious: Lot’s daughters (Gen 19:30–36); Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39); the “strange woman” (Prov 7); Gomer (Hos 1–3); Oholah and Oholibah (Ezek 23). Women of character who assert sexual agency do so for miscellaneous reasons: Leah (Gen 30:16); Tamar (Gen 38). Possibly, Naomi falls into this category (Ruth 3).

without sexual agency, the Song presents a female protagonist uninhibited in sexual initiative. The Song and the rest of the Old Testament canon complement each other. If the latter cautiously accommodates into the contemporaneous culture, the former boldly subverts it. In this essay I will use excerpts from the finale of the Song of Songs (8:5–14) to show how it is dominated by the color of female sexual agency, a color quite absent in the rest of the Old Testament.

1 The “She” of Song of Songs 8:5–14

The female protagonist of the Song appears to enjoy more than her traditionally allowed share of estrogen.³ She hurries the man into bedrooms (1:4), offers him her company at lunch breaks on workdays (1:7), lies in bed disrobed dreaming about him (5:2–4), fantasizes coming upon him in the street and leading him to her house (3:4; 8:2), initiates consummation on the wedding night (4:16), and dances for the man with predictable results (7:1ff [EV 6:13]). As if these private pleasures were inadequate, she chafes against the taboo on public displays of affection (8:1). With this as background, I now argue the case for female sexual agency in the Song from a few sample texts in the closing section of the Song.

In the section Song 8:5–14, the book’s actors line up to take a bow: Friends, She, and He (8:5–14). Friends announce the arrival of He and She. “Who is this coming up ... leaning on her beloved?” (8:5a). Perhaps we are to imagine the lovers being carried in an open palanquin (see 3:7–10). In what we might call PDA, She leans against He. Some read this as She’s bashful expression of dependency on He.⁴ The lines that follow will establish the woman as remarkably independent—she will remind the man of a time when she “(a)roused” him; and she will construct a universal definition of love, pronounce herself worthy of courtship, and invite her beloved to make haste to come enjoy her. Given these, her “leaning” on her lover seems more a public declaration of her choice.⁵ At least, the description conveys the woman’s lack of reticence in matters of romantic attachment.⁶ This lack of reticence appears to be

3 The section on the Song of Songs is dependent on Havilah Dharamraj 2018.

4 E.g. Tremper Longman III 2001, 208; Duane Garrett 2004; Robert W. Jenson 2005, 87–88. Interestingly, all are male Western interpreters.

5 Tom Gledhill 1994, 219.

6 Gianni Barbiero 2011, 447.

at variance with the social conditioning expected in eastern communities, ancient or present-day.⁷

The lack of reticence becomes more explicit in Song 8:5. Recollecting a past pleasure private to the couple, She reminisces: “Under the apple tree I roused (עור) you.” Is it possible that She is recalling nudging her beloved awake on some specific occasion?⁸ The possibility is low. For one, the verb “to rouse” occurs in the refrain that threads through the book: “Do not arouse (עור) or awaken (עור) love until it so desires” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Given this, She could hardly be talking about rousing the man from sleep. What is more, the “rousing” happens under an apple tree, recalling the Song’s favorite aphrodisiac.⁹ The sense of erotic arousal in the woman’s line could hardly be more evident.

Yet, as Krinetzki puts it: “The claim by a woman that she has ‘awakened’ the man’s love would ... be extraordinary, particularly in an ancient Near Eastern poem.”¹⁰ In line with this sentiment, and following the Syriac, some scholars prefer to emend the grammar of the MT here. By changing the gender of the pronoun suffixes in 8:5b, one could place the words “Under the apple tree I roused you” in the mouth of the *man* rather than the woman. The emendation makes the man the agent of the verb “to arouse,”¹¹ satisfying the cultural presuppositions of both the ancient audience of the Syriac version, and a few present-day scholars—presuppositions about sexual agency that She cheekily upends.

So then, here is a woman who is bold both in public (as she processes in a palanquin) and in private (at the apple tree hideaway) to make the man hers. Indeed, as Keel rightly points out, the reader has seen glimpses of her initiative before: she goes looking for the man in the city at night, and on finding him, she seizes him and leads him to her bedchamber; her beloved is smitten helpless by “one glance of [her] eyes”; in fact, he must ask her to stop looking at him, so much do they “overwhelm” him (3:4; 4:9; 6:5).¹² What is more, in this book, the adjurations not to arouse love are repeatedly made, not to men, but to a group of women called “the daughters of Jerusalem” (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).

7 See Havilah Dharamraj 2013.

8 So M. V. Fox 1985, 168.

9 Othmar Keel 1994, 88, 82–83.

10 G. Krinetzki 1981, cited in Othmar Keel 1994, 267.

11 Marvin H. Pope argues that the MT’s masculine vocalization of the pronoun suffixes has endured through centuries of allegorical interpretation which would have had to allow that YHWH could be “(a)roused” by his bride Israel. Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 663; also, Roland Murphy 1990, 191. See Othmar Keel 1994, 267–69 who refers to the initiative of ancient West Asian goddesses courting their admirers, and the Old Testament narratives of the bold Ruth and Tamar (Gen 38).

12 Othmar Keel 1994, 268.

“Place me like a seal over your heart; Like a seal on your arm” (8:6) she says to her lover. Seals were the ancient world’s ID cards, and were either worn on a cord around the neck or as a finger ring (Gen 38:18; Jer 22:24). An Egyptian love poem features such a seal. The man, yearning to close the separation between him and the object of his affection, sighs: “If only I were her little seal-ring/ the keeper of her finger!/ I would see her love each and every day.”¹³ Here, in the Song, a similar sentiment is voiced, but the voice is female. What is more, the line is not simply wishful. The Hebrew is an imperative. It indicates insistence rather than plea. She commands him: “Place me like a seal over your heart!” From what we have seen so far, She exuberantly subverts the cultural expectation of the stereotypical woman as ancient Israel profiles her.

Now, two vignettes follow, each beginning with a “story”—the story of the little sister and the story of Solomon’s vineyard. The first story (8:8–10) is cultural, arising from a world in which the men of the household arranged marriages. The second story (8:11–12) comes from the economic sphere and uses the metaphors of share-cropping and dividends.¹⁴ Both stories are declarations of gendered sexual agency. Let’s see how.

In the first story, She’s brothers are conferring about her marriage prospects. It appears to be their responsibility to see their sister married off. Similar themes of male auspices in marriage can be seen in the stories of Rebekah in Gen 24:29–60; Dinah in Gen 34:6–17; the daughters of Shiloh in Judg 21:22; and Tamar in 1 Kgs 13:21. In Song 8, the girl’s body is still to show signs of puberty but talk of the day She will become eligible to be given in marriage has already begun. In India, when the girl-child first menstruates, it often becomes a ceremonial event, so that the community is given notice of her availability for a future marriage “alliance.”

We have a little sister,
And her breasts are not yet grown.
What shall we do for our sister
On the day she is spoken for? (8:8)

The brothers agree among themselves that they must enhance, or perhaps protect, the girl’s prospects:

13 *Cairo Love Songs, Group B: 21C* translated in M. V. Fox 1985, 38, 169. Similarly, William W. Hallo 1983, here, 7–12.

14 J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 255.

If she is a wall,/ We will build a battlement of silver on her.
 If she is a door,/ We will enclose her with panels of cedar. (8:9)

If the lines are in synonymous parallelism,¹⁵ both lines express the speakers' desire to safeguard the girl's virginity while enhancing her attractiveness as a marriage prospect.¹⁶ They express themselves using the metaphors of a wall and a (closed) door, both of which evoke the idea of inaccessibility. The Song has sufficiently confirmed that inaccessibility is culturally desirable in a maiden. The girl is sequestered behind windows and lattices (2:9, 14); She is a "garden locked up ... a spring enclosed ... a sealed fountain" (3:12); She lies behind a door that must be unbolted to let the man in (5:2–6). A woman who made herself available to a man before marriage would be considered damaged goods. Indeed, even if the woman had been taken against her will, her marriageability would drop.¹⁷ Thus, the girl in this text is to keep her chastity safe, as behind an impregnable wall or a closed door. While this is what the girl does to keep herself desirable, those who have her interests at heart will do the best they can to enhance that desirability. They will decorate the wall with a silver battlement (or turret);¹⁸ they will panel the door with cedar. They ornament and increase the value of the already inaccessible wall and door in anticipation of a fat bride price and a good catch.

Since this conversation between her brothers, She has grown into womanhood. Now, recalling their words, She reworks the building metaphor:

I am a wall,
 And my breasts are like towers.
 Thus I have become in his eyes
 Like one bringing *shalom*. (8:8–10)

She describes herself as a wall with towers—embellishments that make any assistance from her well-wishers unnecessary. That she is indeed as

15 So, Robert Gordis 1954, 97; M. V. Fox 1985, 172; Mary T. Elliott 1989, 202; Othmar Keel 1994, 278–79; Diane Bergant 2001, 101; Elie Assis 2009, 246; Duane Garrett 2004, 260; Elizabeth Huwiler 1999, 288; G. Lloyd Carr 1984, 172.

16 Exum prefers to read 8:8–10 as a playful question-and-answer style riddle having nothing to do with the female protagonist's chastity (J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 258).

17 Thus, a man who forcibly takes a maiden must himself marry her, presumably because no one else might. A further clause protects her by pre-empting any unscrupulous behavior—he must never divorce her (Deut 22:28–29). An Indian proverb well describes the vulnerability of the woman in matters sexual: "Whether the leaf falls on the thorn or the thorn on the leaf, it is the leaf that is torn."

18 See discussion of שַׁלֹּם in Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 680–81.

impregnable as a fortress we know from other parts of the Song. She is the one who waits behind windows (2:9) and in the private space of her bedchamber (3:1). Her door is bolted from the inside, and one who wishes to enter must entreat and then wait till She undoes the bolt (3:1–5). Even her own beloved has had to endure waiting and separation till She deigns to let him into her private space. He hasn't received a spare key by which He can let himself in.

Having declared herself as impregnable as a wall, the woman takes the metaphor a step further to make a disclosure that must have startled her brothers. Yes, She is a city immune to siege, with towers unassailable. However, like such a city might decide to do,¹⁹ She has decided to bring²⁰ *shalom*. Given her independence, we must infer that She initiates a negotiated peace. Under her terms, her breasts, which she described as defensive towers, become available for her beloved's pleasure (1:13; 4:5; 7:3[4]; 7:7–8[8–9]).²¹

The imaginary exchange, ending with a declaration of sexual agency is in remarkable contrast to the cultural norm. Usually, a woman waits hopefully to find grace (יָד) in a man's eyes—that is, she waits to be chosen as someone's wife.²² The Song's She is not one to wait. Rather, She chooses when She will surrender, and to whom.

The second story begins:

Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
He let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand shekels of silver. (8:11)

The reader well knows that the vineyard can be a circumlocution for the female body (1:6; 2:15; 6:11; 7:12 [13]) and begins to read the text at two levels—as both vineyard-tending and amorous pursuit.

19 Duane Garrett 2004, 258 n. 10d.

20 מְבִיָּאֵר may be read as the hiphil active participle of מָבִיָּא ("one who brings"): Richard S. Hess 2005, 245; Tremper Longman III 2001, 218; Diane Bergant 2001, 102; John G. Snaith 1993, 126. Or, it may be read as the qal of מָבִיָּא ("one who finds"): Elie Assis 2009, 247; Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 217–18; Daniel J. Estes 2010, 412–13; Duane Garrett 2004, 258n10d; Roland Murphy 1990, 193; M. V. Fox 1985, 173; Gianni Barbiero 2011, 479–82; G. Lloyd Carr 1984, 172–73; Mary T. Elliott 1989, 204–05; Robert Gordis 1954, 98. Some allow both: J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 258–60; Edward M. Curtis 2013, 158. See Francis Landy for four possible meanings (find peace; bring peace; surrender; be the "evening star"). Francis Landy 1980, here, 81–83.

21 Richard S. Hess 2005, 245.

22 Ruth 2:2, 10, 13; Deut. 24:1. For parallels to this bold characterization in Greek literature (that the Song may have been influenced by), see Joan B. Burton 2005.

Without pressing the parallels too hard, the metaphor serves to contrast the speaker with Solomon. Both possess vineyards, but vastly different in size. Solomon is lord of Baal-Hamon, a (probably fictitious²³) place-name suggesting at once both an abundance of wealth and women. Solomon's "vineyard" is so vast that he must let it out to share-croppers. Tenancy does not permit the "fruit" of the vineyard to be entirely Solomon's. Part of the proceeds goes to his tenants. Is the allusion here to the keepers of Solomon's fabled harem (1 Kgs. 11:3; Song 6:8) who may help themselves to its delights? The speaker can scornfully dismiss Solomon and his money and his women in three words: *הָאֶלֶף לְךָ שְׁלֹמֹה* ("Keep your thousand, Solomon!"). Solomon is removed from the possibility of love by intermediaries and by distance.²⁴

In contrast to Solomon, the speaker has a vineyard that is exclusively theirs:

But my own vineyard is mine to give;
The thousand are for you, Solomon,
And two hundred are for those who tend its fruit. (8:12)

In the Hebrew, exclusive possession is emphasized with a redundant three-word sentence, each ending with a first-person singular pronoun. The New English Translation nicely tracks this emphasis: "*My* vineyard, which belongs to *me*, is at *my* disposal alone."²⁵ Here, the identity of the speaker is up for debate.²⁶

23 Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 219; M. V. Fox 1985, 174. Contra those who seek to identify it with an actual place: e.g. Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 687–88.

24 Duane Garrett 2004, 263.

25 Emphasis added. The Hebrew *לפני* may be read either literally as "before me" / "in front of me" (J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 260; Elizabeth Huwiler 1999, 290), or as most scholars do, idiomatically. If the latter, it could mean "at my disposal" (cf. Gen. 13:9, 20:15; so, Roland Murphy 1990, 194, 200; Duane Garrett 2004, 258n12a; Tom Gledhill 1994, 240; Othmar Keel 1994, 282; Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 690; Gianni Barbiero 2011, 490; Mary T. Elliott 1989, 207–08; Iain Provan 2001, 370) or "near at hand" (cf. Prov 4:3; Isa 53:2; so, Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 219; M. V. Fox 1985, 175 suggesting an extended meaning of "in my care"). Robert L. Alden points out a textual parallel in Judg 11:9 in which Jephthah speaks about defeating the Ammonites: *וַיִּנָּתֶן יְהוָה אוֹתָם לִפְנֵי*; lit. "[if] the LORD gives them before me." The sense here is clearly idiomatic. Jephthah is entertaining the possibility that Ammon will be in his handed over to him as his prize in war "to dispose of, exploit, enslave." Thus, if the man is speaking, the vineyard is his "to hold, to enjoy, or to use." If it is the woman who speaks, she is claiming she "controls" or "owns" the vineyard. Robert L. Alden 1988, here, 274.

26 In favor of the woman as speaker are: Elie Assis 2009, 250–51; Daniel J. Estes 2010, 414; Duane Garrett 2004, 259; Roland Murphy 1990, 199–200; Richard S. Hess 2005, 246–47; Tremper Longman III 2001, 218–19. Preferring the man as speaker are: J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 255–56, 259–61; Mary T. Elliott 1989, 206; Jill M. Munro 1995, 41–42; M. V. Fox 1985, 174; Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch 1995, 218; Robert W. Jenson 2005, 99; Diane Bergant 2001,

If the speaker is the man, his words reiterate his earlier claims that his beloved is solely his, also made with plant imagery. “I have come into *my* garden ... gathered *my* myrrh with *my* spice ... eaten *my* honeycomb and *my* honey ... drunk *my* wine and *my* milk” (5:1; italics added). And again: “Your stature is like that of the palm, and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree; *I* will take hold of its fruit’ (7:7–8; italics added).

If the speaker is the woman, She expresses her right to give herself to the one she has set her heart on. “My own vineyard is mine to give,” She asserts, echoing other places in the Song when She has offered herself to her beloved with similar eagerness. “Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits” (4:16). “Let us go early to the vineyards ... there I will give you my love” (7:12) “I would give you spiced wine to drink, the nectar of my pomegranates” (8:2).

She can make these offers because She is confident of their reception. Earlier She asserted the man’s ownership of her and deployed it within an equation of mutual belonging. “My beloved is mine and I am his” (2:16). “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (6:3). The third repeat of this sentiment is significant to the offer of herself: “I am my beloved’s, and his desire (תְּשׁוּקָה) is for me” (7:10). She gives in the confidence that she satisfies his desire.

Pope deliberates on the identity of the speaker of 8:11–12 thus: “If the groom [*sic*] speaks, declaring dominion over his spouse’s body, it is classic male chauvinism. If the female here asserts autonomy, this verse becomes the golden text for women’s liberation.”²⁷ Tracking the trend of female sexual agency across this section of Song 8, as we have done, we would agree with the latter.

When the section, and the book, concludes, it is She speaking:

Come away, my beloved.
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the spice-laden mountains. (8:14)

What are these spice-laden mountains? Metaphorically, they could be a place or places on the woman’s body suggestive of cleft hills (cp. Song 4:6).²⁸ Considering the stag as an ancient symbol of virility,²⁹ it appears that She anticipates more than just graceful fleet-footedness from her beloved. As the book

102; Othmar Keel attributes the critical text 8:12 to the man. 1994, 282. For a summary of views see Robert L. Alden 1988, 274–76.

27 Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 690. Contra Robert L. Alden 1988, 277–78.

28 Michael D. Goulder 1986; Duane Garrett 2004, 163.

29 See Marvin H. Pope 1977a, 386; Othmar Keel 1994, 92–94, 96–97, 117; Robert Gordis 1954, 26.

closes, the reader is expected to add in an ellipsis and leave it to the couple to complete the poem in private. The Song had opened with the woman's urgent invitation to her beloved: "Let him kiss me ...!" (Song 1:2). It closes similarly with her calling him to "Come away ...!" The book ends as it begins, foregrounding *She* in initiative.

So culturally bemusing is *She* in her use of sexual agency that the reader should not be faulted for wondering if *She* exists—as Clines does: If the Song's woman is so different from the regular, it may be because "[s]he is not a real woman, she is a figment of the poet's imagination." The poet "is a certain kind of man, who wants a certain kind of woman, a type that is not generally available in his culture. He fantasizes such a woman."³⁰ But, we remind ourselves, we are not reading *She* to determine her cultural existence. We are reading her as a canonical other-half-of-a-phone-conversation. *She* is the ideal that challenges the idea that only men get to make decisions—whether right ones or wrong ones—on who may lie with whom. And, as that ideal, *She* may not be simply ahead of her times, but ours as well.

Let me argue this using Indian social norms. The average Indian reader of the Old Testament would understand well the world the Old Testament describes. Both are worlds in which female initiative in matters sexual is undesirable. The Indian woman could be unmarried, such as *She* might be in parts of the Song, in which case she would be promptly labelled as being "forward." She would attract the unwelcome advances of males eager to turn this to their advantage, but, when it comes to marriage choices, the traditional Indian bachelor will decide in favour of the "homely" kind, a girl thought to be passive in matters amorous. If it is a married Indian woman whose sexual initiatives take her into an extra-marital liaison, her adultery attracts the label of whore.

The cultural expectation, then, is that what marks a "good" Indian woman or wife is an abdication of sexual self-determination. She is disallowed the prerogative of sexual agency—a prerogative Indian society jealously reserves for its males. So jealously is this prerogative guarded that it can lead to a certain way of dealing with adultery. The betrayed husband, and even society, may be reluctant to acknowledge the wife's actions as adultery. I will attempt to argue that one significant reason for this is to avoid awarding her the sexual agency the term adulteress implies.

30 David J. A. Clines 1995, here, 106.

2 An Infamous Indian Case and Its Reel Life

Our case study is of one of India's most (in)famous court-cases, which turned into India's first media trial: Nanavati vs. the State of Maharashtra. A parallel in American courtroom drama might be the 1995 O. J. Simpson trial. Indeed, Gyan Prakash, a Princeton historian who chronicles this case in his *Mumbai Fables*, calls it India's "own 'OJ case.'"³¹

Played out in a Bombay (now, Mumbai) courtroom in 1959, this trial has seen cultural iterations in movies, stage plays, and books across the decades that followed.³² The case as commonly understood is as follows:³³ Kawas Nanavati is a naval officer with a promising career. A decade before the story starts, he has returned from training in Britain with a British wife—the very beautiful Sylvia. They are living a fairy-tale happily-ever-after existence in their posh Bombay residence, their lives largely a blur of dining out and dancing—that is, when Nanavati isn't out at sea. When he is out, Sylvia usually devotes her time to their three children. This time though, she devotes it to a certain Prem Ahuja, a wealthy bachelor the Nanavati couple has met earlier on the party circuit. Nanavati returns from months out on duty. His wife seems markedly unenthusiastic about his homecoming. He probes. She let him know that she is in a relationship with Ahuja. He leaves home, heads for his docked ship, issues himself a revolver and arrives at Ahuja's house. Let in by the domestic staff, he makes his way to Ahuja's bedroom. There is an exchange of words, and three shots are fired. Leaving Ahuja's body on the floor—he had just then emerged from his bath and had nothing more than a towel around his waist—Nanavati takes himself to the nearest police station and turns himself in, confessing to homicide.

The trial that followed was nothing short of a circus. Nanavati's family closed ranks. Their money and influence bought them the savviest of lawyers on whose advice Nanavati pleaded Not Guilty. Their community-owned local tabloid, *Blitz*, conducted a parallel trial-by-media—the patriot soldier against the supposed playboy.³⁴ The navy was determined to rescue its own. The family's political connections, which went all the way up to the Prime Minister of India, were activated. Eventually, the jury turned in an almost unanimous

³¹ Murali K. Menon, MW, accessed Jul 26, 2022.

³² Indra Sinha, 2002. "Ami Natya Velar," a Konkani translation of the Kannada play by Ramachandra Churya, staged till around 2006. Bachi Karkaria 2020.

³³ My telling draws on the following: Gyan Prakash 2011; Aarti Sethi 2005, accessed July 26, 2022; Bachi Karkaria 2017, accessed Jul 26, 2022.

³⁴ As in Aarti Sethi 2005, 447. The mentions of *Blitz* below this are as depicted in a movie.

decision (except for one vote) in favor of Nanavati. He testified that he had gone to Ahuja to ask him this question: "Are you prepared to marry my wife and look after my children?" Ahuja, he said, tossed him the nonchalant reply: "Will I marry every woman I sleep with?" A scuffle followed, and the revolver went off accidentally—thrice!—fatally injuring Ahuja. It was a determined bath towel that stayed wrapped around Ahuja's waist through the scuffle and as he slumped to the floor. The judge was so aghast at what he thought was the jury's clouded verdict that he overturned it, sentencing Nanavati to prison. Eventually, the powerful combination of political and naval connections got Nanavati a pardon and allowed him to repatriate to Canada. And they lived happily ever after—perhaps.

Our interest is in following the characterization of Sylvia in the retellings that follow. We are interested in tracking what degree of sexual agency her character receives. This should be relevant to our study of the gendering of sexual agency, considering ancient Israel and present-day India have in common a deeply entrenched patriarchy. The social structures are similar. For example, men dominate the legal and financial spheres, just as much as Boaz and the court of ten (male) elders decide the future of Boaz's widowed relatives (Ruth 4:1–12), and just as much as inheritance laws favor the male (Num 27:1–11). Gender-related practices are similar. For example, arranged marriage is the norm, with the male relatives of the marriageable girl deciding who she will marry—as in the case of Rebekah (Gen 24:32–54). Gender-related values are similar. For example, rape within the family is often hushed up usually in the interest of the family's honor (2 Sam 13:21–22), and the best deal a female rape victim can get is the perpetrator marrying her (Deut 22:29). This socio-cultural continuity between ancient Israel and present-day India allows us to examine the gendering of sexual agency. Given the robust role of Bollywood in reflecting real life and, more significantly, in informing it, we will track our theme through visual media—more specifically, in film.

Before that, we must stop to make a quick reference to the wife in the court case, Sylvia. Indian journalist Bacchi Karkaria's recent careful and exhaustive research attempts to uncover the "real Sylvia." As a female journalist, Karkaria is intrigued by the woman buried at the bottom of an avalanche of sensational reporting. "Who is Silvia?" she asks, borrowing the opening line of the song in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.³⁵ Who was the *real* Sylvia? After chapters of hardcore investigation, she comes to this conclusion:

35 Act IV scene 2. The name is sometimes re-spelled "Sylvia."

Her extramarital engagement went deeper than the adventurism of lunchtime sex. The court was told of her visits to his flat. There was an overnight trip to Agra, albeit with Ahuja's sister Mamie as "cover." Ahuja's employees spoke of her coming to his office. A member of Mumbai's United Services Club spoke of her being closeted in its phone booth for long, low conversations. Her plaintive missives to Ahuja, submitted as evidence, show that she was deeply in love and hoped for a future with this unapologetic playboy (in open court, she had to read out the letter of 24 May 1958, "Last night when you spoke about your need of marrying, about the various girls you may marry, something inside me snapped and I knew I could not bear the thought of your loving and being close to someone else"). She clearly wanted more than what she was getting in her own marriage.³⁶

Having established that the "original" Sylvia made a proactive choice to enter into an affair, let's take a look at her cinematic versions. Skipping over the earlier Bollywood iterations,³⁷ we arrive at *Rustom*, released in 2016, almost sixty years after the event. *Rustom* was among the box office successes of 2016³⁸ and remains alive and well on Netflix. Oddly, one of the categories it sits in is that of crime thriller.³⁹ Crime, yes, but "thriller"—in an open-and-shut case of furious Husband shoots dead Wife's Lover? That's where the plot falls over itself in its eagerness to evacuate Wife of sexual agency. This agenda is worth exploring in some detail, especially considering that this iteration of the 1959 case reflects current-day Indian sensibilities. The film's popularity—7.0 on IMDb⁴⁰—is a fair index of that.

Rustom's strategy for mopping (almost) clean Wife's capacity for—or interest in—adultery operates at various levels: at that of the characterization of Lover; at that of the characterization of Wife; and at that of the plot. Let us examine these three.

Lover gets front-loaded. The movie opens with navy Husband returning from a long stint at sea, his eagerness to meet Wife evidenced by the flowers

36 Bachi Karkaria 2017.

37 *Yeh Raastey Hain Pyaar Ke* ("This is the Way of Love," 1963); *Achanak* ("Suddenly," 1973). The former characterizes its protagonists employing a cultural logic similar to the more recent *Rustom*, and so *Rustom* may be taken as a case study to mirror present-day India. The latter, *Achanak*, operates on a plot line that is only thinly evocative of the Nanavati murder case.

38 Bollywood Hungama, February 6, 2016.

39 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rustom_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rustom_(film)), accessed Jul 27, 2022.

40 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5165344/>, accessed Jul 27, 2022.

he buys *en route*, the spring in his steps, and the goofy grin on his face. He finds the flat empty of Wife, but full of Lover. There is a ribbon-tied pack of Lover's love letters to Wife. There is an impressive stash of gifts in the cupboard, which clearly Husband hasn't given Wife. (Significantly, the gifts are unopened—but we'll come back to that later.) When he unties the letters, Lover's photograph falls out. As he begins to read the letters, Lover's voice speaks. Wife's absence in the flat is compensated with the presence of seductive Lover. His part in the affair gets first exposure.

This (rather unsubtle) characterization of Lover is increasingly in-your-face. Lover gets attention at the cost of Wife. For example, after Husband surrenders at the local police station declaring homicide, the policeman on duty discerningly dissects the case: "This was going to happen anyway ... considering [Lover's] character. He thought he was Casanova. But, I can't figure how the Commander's wife got involved with *such* a man." Indeed, Lover, as we get to know him, is as slick and suave as they come. The first time he meets Husband and Wife at a party—Lover is the ultimate party animal—he spouts poetry in admiration of her.

Out in the city, the tabloid carrying the lurid details of the case is promoted by the newspaper boy paraphrasing the headlines: "The Commander steps out; his wife's lover steps in!" Or even more conjecturally: "[Lover] practiced voodoo. He used black magic to ensnare women." In a country in which there is hardly a problem that cannot be sorted through the intervention of the occult,⁴¹ Lover's supposed use of voodoo dissolves every fiber of agency Wife might have possessed. Indeed, at the trial, her housekeeper argues emphatically against Lover: a man who callously comes and "takes" the wife of an officer who is on duty serving his nation, well deserves to die. Lover is the subject; Wife is the passive object of the "taking."

Secondly, there is the characterization of Wife. When first we meet her, she is sitting in front of her dressing mirror, mournfully readying herself for a rendezvous with her lover. She seems conflicted about the affair and is considering putting a stop to it. Of course, this is laudable, but the fact remains that this is how Wife is introduced to us: indecisive and hesitant.

Rendezvous finished, she returns home, hardly suspecting that Husband has unexpectedly returned from his trip. Husband, she finds, is sitting in her bedroom with her love letters stacked beside him. He opens conversation by reading a few salacious samples to her. "I can explain," she offers tearfully, looking like a dog an abusive master has roundly whipped. "Trust me, darling," he

41 Dutta, July 6, 2018, accessed July 27, 2022; "Witchcraft: India's Deadly Superstition," February 26, 2016, accessed July 27, 2022.

responds. "You cannot." With that he smartly exits from the bedroom, leaving her with head bowed in abjection, tears rolling down prettily rouged cheeks.

The negative "cannot" dogs Wife through the rest of the movie. At the police interrogation she is asked: "How fond of [Lover] were you?" She hesitates long, and then pleads: "Can I leave, please? I'm very tired." The scriptwriter will not allow her to confess her attraction to a man other than Husband. The closest she comes is when she meets with Husband in the police lockup. Her confession tumbles out in a string of sentences lubricated with tears. "I'm sorry ... I feel so disgusted with myself. I sometimes feel this matter will end only with my death. I was naïve and I was stupid! ... It was a weak moment." Wife seems to understand that society won't know quite what to do with her, and is open to being removed, one way or another.

As she begins to recount to Husband how the affair began, we are shown flashbacks. "[He] missed no opportunity to praise me or to get close to me," she says. We are shown Wife and Lover in Lover's garden, and look, Lover is offering her a wine glass. It begins to rain, and Wife runs towards the house—playfully, or with the intention to escape Lover's attentions we cannot say. But, we cannot help noticing the symbolic resistance that a woman running away from a man makes obvious. She sprains an ankle on the slippery flagstones, and is carried to his bedroom. Her damaged ankle could suggest that she even hurts herself in her effort to exit the precarious situation. That Lover carries her to his bed removes her volition to the extent of exonerating her from any agency in the affair. If she has a "weak moment," we can hardly fault her seeing how cunningly she is ambushed and overwhelmed.

The viewer has to surmise the affair, because *Rustom* carefully avoids any visuals of the two *in flagrante delicti*. One supposes that such images are withheld in deference to the Common Viewer, who, it is assumed would find it a challenge to deal with an enthusiastic adulteress.

With that Common Viewer in mind, the courtroom script runs like this: Lover's sister is in the witness stand, making her case against Wife, the cause of her brother's death. "[My brother] was a *man*. And if a woman shows interest in a man ..." The counsel for prosecution quickly slides in: "'You mean it was [Wife] who took initiative in forming a relationship?" "Of course!" the sister says. But when Wife is cross-examined by the prosecutor, she stoutly denies that this was the case. "[Lover] approached me. [After a while], when I stopped seeing [him], he wrote letters to me, sent me gifts. But I had decided to end my relationship with [him]." Perhaps that is why the gifts are stacked up in her bedroom wardrobe, all unopened. She's received them and kept them, but what's most important to the movie script is that she doesn't care to open them. "Do you hold [him] responsible for everything that happened to you?"

"No," she says, finally conceding—not initiative, but—response on her part. Her part in the affair is boiled down to an irreducible minimum.

The third strategy by which Wife is stripped of agency is by the plot. Lover is an arms dealer in cahoots with the highest echelons of the Indian Navy. Husband unwittingly gets in the way of an aircraft carrier deal. When he comes to know that Lover is behind the deal, Husband spares no words in ticking off Lover. Lover's (male) ego suffers injury. As Husband summarizes it at the end of the movie: "He used [my wife] to get revenge on me." The plot pits male against male, with Wife caught in the crossfire. No wonder, when the prosecution asks Husband "What was the first thought that crossed your mind when you came to know of *your wife's* illicit relationship?" Husband answers: "I wanted to kill *him*" (emphasis added). In fact, those are the words with which the movie ends. The plot has moved the couple to Canada. They are much older, even grandparents now. Husband and Wife are playing "Truth or Dare." Wife asks what Husband would do if she had an affair. Husband responds without missing a beat: "I'd kill the bastard." To the end, *Rustom* ensures that Wife is the passive object of male sexual agency, when, in fact, the original Sylvia made her own sexual choices.

We turn from *Rustom* to the most recent film version of the Nanavati case. *The Verdict* was released in 2019 as a television miniseries of ten episodes. This production uses real-life names for its characters—after all, sixty years had passed and many of the original protagonists had joined the deceased Lover. Significantly, and in contrast to the movie iterations previous, *The Verdict* is produced by a female director, Ekta Kapoor. The shift in the characterization of Wife is remarkable. She initiates the affair with Lover, retreating a bit only when she is cautioned by another navy-wife that he is something of a Casanova, and falling back into the relationship when Lover persuades her of his devotion to her. When she confesses adultery to Husband, she is tearful, but she seems to have no intention of retracting her decision to leave Husband for Lover.

Later, she brings the children to visit their father in detention, but she herself barely speaks to him. Her face and body make it clear that her affections lie with the dead Lover. When confronted, she tearfully stands by her "love" for Lover. *The Verdict's* Wife makes a choice on who may lie with whom, and stands by it. If she relents from this position, it is only when the editor of *Blitz*, a family friend, persuades her that she should make saving her family her priority. "I am a mother," she sobs, explaining her situation to her erstwhile close friend, Lover's sister. "I have no choice. I'm doing this for my kids."

From here on, Sylvia leaves the dead lover behind and throws her energies into salvaging her family relationships. Between her and the counsel for defense, the story created for the courtroom is that she is merely a woman

made vulnerable by her husband's long absences, a vulnerability exploited by a predatory playboy. In the witness stand, she confesses to nothing more than infatuation: "I was infatuated with him. He could sense that, so he started giving me lots of attention." The *Blitz* plays along, describing her as besotted, and her lover as debauched. We wonder if this means that Wife has erased her agency in the affair. The series holds that question unanswered until the final episode. Here the Husband obtains a pardon from the state and the family is making arrangements to emigrate, when Lover's sister pays Wife a visit. She is willing to bury the past and wants to wish Wife well in her new future. "I like your dress," the sister says flippantly, as she has done often in the past when they were friends. "I like your watch," Wife says. It's a pointed remark, because Wife has recognized the watch. It once sat on the wrist of the now-deceased Lover. The sister offers her the watch as a keepsake, and Wife—to our surprise—receives it with a wistful smile. To the end, Wife makes decisions on where she will apply her affection. Clearly, the director doesn't care if the Common Viewer disapproves.

When these two cinematic portrayals of Sylvia are laid alongside each other, it doesn't take much to Spot-the-Difference. *Rustom's* Wife and *The Verdict's* Wife are as much like each other as oil and water. One is the hapless prey of a sexual predator. The other finds herself sexually attracted and acts on it, much like the "real Sylvia" of the 1959 murder case. *Rustom's* script paints over that "real Sylvia" with its black-and-white characterizations: Sylvia is a chaste white; the man she has an extra-marital affair with is tarred black. With its smoke and mirrors, *Rustom* accomplishes a double magic trick. It makes adultery vanish, and with that, it achieves its agenda of making Sylvia's sexual agency vanish. Meanwhile, *The Verdict* insists on keeping its script close to real life so that it can have its Sylvia unapologetic in her exercise of sexual agency. How intriguing that these two opposing cinematic versions, separated by just three years, are both popular! *Rustom* has its 7.0 rating on IMDb, while *The Verdict* enjoys a 7.0 on the same website.⁴² It appears that while there is an enthusiastic vote for the woman who is mistress of her sexual choices, there is also a significant constituency in favour of evacuating her of that agency.

3 Conclusion

Let us pull together the case we are trying to make. Male sexual agency is a patriarchal value. We have attempted to demonstrate that this is so through a

42 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9193600/>, accessed Jul 27, 2022.

cinematic rendering of the factual account of an adulterous wife. The director retells the story in a direction that the Indian movie-viewing audience—which knows the facts of the famous case—seems to approve of. The movie *Rustom* doggedly attaches itself to the cultural agreement that the freedom to choose with whom he may lie differentiates a man from a woman. From that starting position, it goes to the extreme length of choosing to exonerate an adulterous wife rather than have the husband reckoning with the fact that his wife exercised a privilege he has arrogated to himself, against him. While the cover-up of a wife's adultery also helps to preserve the honor of the family—another high value in a patriarchal ethos—the social resistance to the trope of adulterous wife compels the plot of *Rustom*. Sethi describes well the function played by such a retelling: “Events told over time become part of the mythic lore of a community. They are told and retold to define boundaries of action, to concretise norms and modes of being.”⁴³ *Rustom* affirms a certain “mode of being” by inflexibly locating sexual agency in the male domain. *The Verdict*, on the other hand—perhaps because its director is female—agrees with Karkaria, a female journalist: “[I]t's time to give [Sylvia] agency for her actions, see her as a woman with the will or the courage to follow her heart, whatever the consequences.”⁴⁴

That brings us back to the script of the Song of Songs. Germane to our argument on the gendering of sexual agency is how She, in an androcentric ethos similar to that of India, startles the reader by briskly tossing aside this particular patriarchal value. While *Rustom* re-scripts the real-life Sylvia to retain the male hold on sexual agency, even at the cost of whitewashing her adultery, the Song makes bold to present its readers with a woman who insists on having a say in the question of with whom she will lie.

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43 Aarti Sethi 2005, 445.

44 Bachi Karkaria 2017.

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Space and Regulation in the Song of Songs and Contemporary Sexual Politics

Yvonne Sherwood

My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind.

OVID, *Metamorphoses*



The Song of Songs is a deliciously *empty* space, a space where so much is lacking—and as we know (and as the history of the Song’s interpretation so excessively shows us), lack leads us to overcompensate, and not to have is the beginning of interpretative desire.¹ The book is strangely secular, but also without *saeculum*, in the sense of either time/age or world. There is no God (as in Esther)—but also no territory, no map, no politics, no law, no Torah, no nation or national story (as in Job). The space of the Song is like a surrealist montage, with glimpses of place-names and outlines superimposed on one another. Like the garden of Eden lying somewhere/nowhere at the intersection between actual rivers (the Tigris and the Euphrates) and mythical rivers (the Pishon and the Gihon, Gen 2:11–14), the space through which the figures move lies somewhere or nowhere between utopia and a vague incantatory evocation of proper names: Lebanon, Heshbon, Jerusalem, and Shulam(?) like Job’s Uz. In his own beautiful simile, Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai imagines the lovers trying to track one another on a “simile map.”² Transported on “snatches of story,” the reader’s feet making contact with small fragments of geographical ground, “we move unexpectedly from the rocky cliffs to the nut garden ... from

1 Ovid 1986, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes, Book 1.1 (Harmondsworth, Penguin), 29. For one of many reflections on the force of lack in the Song, see Carey Ellen Walsh 2006, “In the Absence of Love,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Song*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, 283–293 (New York: Fordham University).

2 Yehuda Amichai 2000, “The Bible and You and other Midrashim,” in *Open Closed Open*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York: Harcourt), 27.

the Lebanon in the north to Engedi by the Dead Sea.”³ There is landscape—but only in the distance. We can just make out the recognisable peaks of Amarna, Seir and Hermon, blurring into phantasmagoric mountains of myrrh and hills of frankincense and melting into landscape-as-cloud.

1 Space without Politics

God is missing—but not pointedly so. The divine absence is not marked, as it is in the book of Esther, where the national crisis is such that one would expect God to intervene. In contrast, in the Song, the lack of theology seems more accidental. But the central flitting figures in the Song seem to have been very deliberately given a pass from the world of politics. The possibility of a city exists—in the distance. The poet seems to have visited one at least once, to gather urban nouns with which to compare and adorn the lovers. The female lover-speaker runs to and through the city, to seek her lover in the open spaces: the gaps, the broad spaces/streets (*rehovot*) and the *shevaqim* which are sometimes translated “public square” but that are a long way from the modern political trope of the public square (Song 3:2). The city is neither metropolis nor polis. And the city is not *here*, and nor are the temple, or palace, or courts, or city gate. *Here* is a space for two: two who have somehow shaken themselves free of politics and society and all the complexities of social ecology; two who get to move through a compliant and supportive space that seems to want nothing more than to enhance and amplify their drama: “My beloved is mine, and I am his.”

There are not many buildings. But there are many references to the *edges* of buildings and *openings* in the walls: doors, latches, windows, lattices, bolts, handles (but not city *gates*—spaces for legal transactions). In a poetics of anti-matter, the poem seems to concentrate not on the solid materiality of the walls, but the spaces in-between. These openings are also openings in the lovers’ bodies; the openings in their skin. It is as if these magic doors, windows, and latches hang in mid-air, in a space without walls, without buildings, just openings. Insofar as it uses concrete nouns associated with buildings, the Song dwells on the domestic interiors in which we dwell, as seen from the inside: chambers, couches, tables, beams, rafters, roofs. There are no courts, or temples, but there is a *bet ha-yayin* or “house of wine” (Song 2:14), making

3 Harold Fisch 1988, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University), 89.

the Song an enviable space in which to live.⁴ The two central figures are nourished by the shade of trees and they become trees—and the trees that they sit under, and that they both are, become roofs, tables, palanquins. The trees are us and they are ours: our *home*, the inside to which we retreat. “Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine.” There is no inside space that is not also outside; no clear line between the organic and the inorganic, the living and the non-living. The couch, the couch on which they sit, is luxuriant, verdant, fresh, bursting with life, and green.

Just as there are only the vaguest remains of society, politics and the *polis*, so human figures take on shadowy, distant, amorphous forms, and social roles recede. Traders (people on the move) put in a momentary appearance—but only at a distance, at considerable metaphorical remove, in the phrase “the fragrant powders of the merchant” (Song 3:6). The travelling merchant is called on to evoke the smoky, perfumed presence of the lover as he emerges from that most amorphous of spaces, *ha-midbar* “the wilderness.” There is a bride and so, perhaps, somewhere, a wedding—but it is not at all clear how this public social structure relates to the shapeshifting lovers looking for one another and occasionally touching before they part. The only social roles delineated, vaguely, are the intimate, proximate ones of family and royal family: mother, sister, bride, brothers, king, queens, and *pilagshim* (‘concubines’/ secondary wives/ sex slaves) (Song 6:8). It is not clear how the roles relate to one another, or to the figures. Like all the other forms that the two central figures move into, and out of, they coalesce—sometimes oxymoronically—and blur.

Occasionally we can just about glimpse the outlines of the built environment: towers, shields, the gates of Bath-rabbim and the pools of Heshbon—but only as metaphorical accessories for the beloved (e.g. Song 7.4). Architectural forms shrink and turn into metaphors for jewellery. The outlines of buildings merge with, and adorn, the lovers’ bodies: the neck, nose and eyes. Sometimes there is a crowd, a cloud: shadowy hosts of figures somewhere in the background, a mass of distant humanity there (far away) for the purpose of comparison, or to serve as a backdrop to the movement of the shadowy main players. There are the “ten thousand” that the lover exceeds, as one man in ten thousand; the “daughters of Jerusalem” as a shadowy strange chorus (a *silent* chorus—whose role is not to speak or sing, but to be spoken to, given

4 Following Chana Bloch's translation. “House of wine” may mean “a place in which wine is drunk, a wine cellar, or a hut in the vineyards ... or, metaphorically, a place where the lovers meet to make love.” And as she points out, “‘banquet hall’ suggest[s] either English nobility or bar mitzvahs in the Bronx.” Chana Bloch 2006, “Translating Eros,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Song*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, 151–161 (New York: Fordham University), 157.

warnings, and told to speak messages which they never deliver); and the “sixty *gibborim*” who attend Solomon’s litter, absorbed, like “the thousand,” into a faceless entourage (Song 3:7; 5:10). Though the name Solomon is used, this Solomon seems to bear no relationship whatsoever to the Solomon in Samuel–Kings. This Solomon only has an *’appiryon* (palanquin? Song 3:9),⁵ a litter and a couch: furniture to be carried on and on which to take an occasional rest from the quest for the beloved. The lack of the beloved seems to be the only *negative* lack in this delicious emptiness. In a very positive lack, the man-king lacks anything to *do*, apart from seeking out the beloved of whom he can never get enough. He does not have to sully his hands with the messy work of governance. As the most kingly of kings in this songiest of songs,⁶ he gets to live in a truly regal, transcendent and impossibly sovereign space without rivals, competition or *Realpolitik*.

2 First Turn to Politics: Luther’s Failed Reading (Perversely Political)

Though interpretations of the Song have been lavish and expansive, they have also been trapped, obsessively and competitively, between spiritual and literal/sexual readings, avoiding politics as determinedly as the Song itself. Jewish readers in the *peshat* tradition, including Ibn Ezra and Rashi, and Christian interpreters following the Antiochene (plain sense) tradition, such as Theodore of Mopsuestia, tended to read the Song literally, which is to say sexually, but in a very different tone and style to modern ‘literal’ readers. Such readings were often risky. Theodore of Mopsuestia was posthumously condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 553, and his commentary disappeared. The humanist reformer Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) was expelled from Calvin’s Geneva for reading the text as a “lascivious and obscene poem in which Solomon described his indecent amours.”⁷ Modern readers, in contrast, flamboyantly performed a public recovery of the Song as the sexiest biblical

5 Cf. Marc Brettler 2006, “Unresolved and Unresolvable: Problems in Interpreting the Song,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Song*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, 185–198 (New York: Fordham University).

6 Cf. David Clines 1995, “Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does it Do to You If You Read it?” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, 94–121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic).

7 Roland H. Bainton 1963, “The Bible in the Reformation,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University), 8; Jarett A. Carty 2011, “Martin Luther’s Political Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *The Review of Politics* 73: 449–467; 466.

book enabled by the (strangely) joined forces of historical criticism and the widespread belief in the (spatial) idea of modernity as the brave new world of freedom, including sexual freedom.⁸ The resurgent literal reading helped to boost the idea of the freedom of the modern/secular, reinforcing the mythology of modernity as an *opening* into brave new spaces that had been prohibited by more confined and pious pasts.

If a literal reading has always been (deliciously) tainted by the sensation of transgression and indiscretion, the spiritualizing, 'biblicizing' alternative has hardly offered a safe and comfortable alternative. Interpreters who attempted to fill up the theological holes in the Song found themselves spending an awkward amount of time on the precise body parts that needed to be translated if not quite transcended. Coded allegories of the relationship between God and the celibate male worshipper/lover removed the female body to leave barely spiritualised male figures and collectives in an intimate embrace.

Allegorical readers often felt out on a limb as they attempted to translate the body parts and limbs of the Song into a rather carnal spirituality. But a *political* reading was far *more* over-stretched. Martin Luther clearly felt embarrassed and apologetic as he presented a gauche sermon of 1530–31 which interpreted the Song as “an encomium of the political order” and an allegory of “Solomon’s *state*.”⁹ Making anxious comments on the seeming “absurdity” of his sermon, Luther seems to be able to do little more than argue that the absurdity of his reading is at least not as absurd as “the absurd opinions which have so far obscured this little book.” His strange reading is at least far better than the “immature and strange” readings of Catholic “tropologists” whose “learning is not unlike bodies infected with dropsy—inflated by extraordinary swelling.”¹⁰ (As Carole Fontaine points out, this identification of the Song with Catholicism is still very strong in Protestant churches where the poem is associated with the “scents and sounds, the movements, sacraments and sculptures that render Catholicism so foreign to fundamentalist Protestant sensibilities.”¹¹) Aware

8 As one example of many, see Michael V. Fox’s case for ‘amour libre’ in 2005, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin).

9 Martin Luther 1972, *Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon and the Last Word*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 15 (Missouri: Concordia), 194. For a helpful discussion of this understandably neglected political allegory, see Jarett A. Carty 2011.

10 Martin Luther 1972, 194.

11 Carole R. Fontaine 2006, “Song? Songs? *Whose* Song? Reflections of a Radical Reader,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Song*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, 294–305 (New York: Fordham University), 295. As Carole R. Fontaine points out, in conservative Protestant churches the Song is neglected in favour of the Prophets, with the emphasis less on radical messages of social and economic justice, and more on metaphors of sex/sin and messianic prophecies of the coming of Christ.

that he has hardly exorcised the absurdity—in fact quite the reverse—Luther writes, in his conclusion: “If I am wrong about this a first effort deserves lenience. The musings of others have a much larger share of absurdity”¹²—in an embarrassed plea for forgiveness and grace.

The swollen details of Luther’s reading justify his lack of faith in his own interpretation. He protests (too much) that the “rather amatory” language is not offensive, and that the Holy Spirit is comfortable with the sexual body. Female body parts are “blessings of God’s good order,” and “the Holy spirit is pure and so mentions women’s bodily members that he wants them to be regarded as good creatures of God.”¹³ But body parts are awkwardly forced into an anatomy of the body politic. The woman’s thighs signify a system of schools for training political and religious ministers, but Germany lamentably lacks “a fitting and elegant junction of the thighs.”¹⁴ The bed becomes code for “the realm, magistrates and people” and “God lies with them in this bed.” “Rosy lips” which are “wonderfully fitting in a girl” “signify the office of teaching.”¹⁵ What is important about the girl’s goat-like hair (Song 4:1) is that the goats are shorn and that the hairs are all the same length (apparently). This allows her neatly-trimmed hair to signify “concord and agreement” among the teachers and leaders of the state.¹⁶ In a fabulously grotesque figure of supersession, when Solomon says “Our sister is small and she has no breasts,” the proleptically Christian king is acknowledging the “extent of the kingdom which Christ will institute through the new covenant,” which will grow like large like full breasts.¹⁷ Luther is embarrassed because he is being so faithful to the Song and its love of wild grotesque metaphors and “allegory gone mad.”¹⁸ As the women’s thighs become schools and developing breasts are forced to signify maturation into the greater and freer “extent” (or open space) of Christianity, Luther’s political allegory swells into something like a grotesque version of the body of the church in 1 Corinthians 12.

Luther’s aim is to liberate the Song from the sphere of solipsistic intimacy—sexual and spiritual. He wants to release it from the introspective “divinations” of readers who “indulge in speculations or *private* musings” and make

12 Martin Luther 1972, 274.

13 Martin Luther 1972, 249.

14 Martin Luther 1972, 250.

15 Martin Luther 1972, 229.

16 Martin Luther 1972, 228.

17 Martin Luther 1972, 259.

18 Fiona Black 2009, *The Artifice of Love: Grotesque Bodies and the Song of Songs* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum), 166.

a different type of interpretation “more suitable ... [and] *useful* for life.”¹⁹ He wants to take the Song out of Catholicism and out of the garden, the space of sex, rest, and introspective spirituality, and make a book that *works*: a book with meaning, purpose, a good work ethic and productive application in public/political life. But he struggles to read the Song as an allegory of the political theology of the *Zwei Reiche*: a model of “secular,” temporal, God-ordained and Word-governed government established in opposition to the ecclesiastical control of the Papists, and the threats of Müntzer and the Peasants’ Revolt. The constant movement of the lovers seeking one another is transposed into the quest of Solomon, as a type of the Magistrate, for God as his “colleague” in government and for the Word as the edifice of government. In the Song, the constant quest for the lover signals desire for a joy and a body of which one can never get enough. In Luther’s dark transformation, lack of consummation becomes code for war and the turmoil of *Realpolitik*. Movement in the Song translates into a bleak political rhythm. In public affairs “new storms, new disturbances and alarms,” new “tumults and calamities,” follow “brief periods of peace.”²⁰

To read the Song as an allegory of government seems particularly perverse: far more perverse than a sexual or spiritual reading. The spatial dream of political modernity is organised around the separation of politics and the “public square” from the private sphere, signified by 1) the home and women (sexuality); and 2) religion and the church. Modern readers, at home with modern spaces, are therefore entirely at home with the most common readings (literal-sexual and allegorical-spiritual), which place the Song in the realms seen as the others of politics: the home and interior spaces, and the Church. Euphemising, theologizing readings might seem absurd, but they are also fitting because they reflect the book’s location in a space that seems, in modern terms, private—and not at all public in the sense of “the public square.”

Despite his dreams of political utility and public application, modern readers could do nothing with Luther’s strained little political allegory, except politely ignore it. Reformation theologians decorously forgot it. Historian of ideas Quentin Skinner passes over it in silence in his famous study of Luther and the political theologies of the Reformation in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*.²¹ Luther demonstrates the spectacular failure of a ‘political’ reading that tries to translate women’s thighs and beds into offices, education, and bureaucracy—all that the Song is so emphatically lacking, as it moves

19 Emphasis added. Martin Luther 1972, 194.

20 Martin Luther 1972, 200.

21 See Jarett A. Carty 2011.

between the intimate and the natural world in the broadest sense. The sermon is so perversely gauche because it tries to restore what the Song so stubbornly brackets out: society, city, *polis*, and all the mechanisms of politics, government and law.²²

3 Intimacies without Privacy: The Song and Elizabeth Smart

One of the most powerful modern transpositions of the Song is Elizabeth Smart's delirious, disorientating, and deeply intimate—but not private—novel, *By Grand Central Station I sat Down and Wept* (1945). As in the Song, occasional landmarks (a swimming pool, a prison cell, Arizona, Third Avenue, the Hudson River, Grand Central Station) and hints of narrative and happening (like “the Beginning”) are carried away in a wash of language, world and love.²³ Everything gives way to the one fact of “love huge and simple.”²⁴ Smart confesses the absolute monotheism of love: “There are no minor facts in life, there is only the one tremendous delirious one.”²⁵ The catechism of mono-love is repeated over and over again, with monotheistic zeal:

I saw then that there was nothing else anywhere but this one thing: that neither nunneries nor Pacific Islands nor jungles nor all the jazz of America nor the frenzy of warzones could hide any corner which housed an ounce of consolation if this failed. In all states of being, in all worlds, this is all there is.²⁶

A little incantatory stream of citation can at least give a sense of the impressionistic tide of sensation in this novel. Even the name and being of the beloved dissolve in the woman's experience of him, which fills the whole world and becomes the whole world:

22 Rare modern ‘political’ readings are far more decorously and tangentially ‘political’. See Scott B. Noegel and Gary A. Rendsberg’s reading of the Song as a veiled critique of the decadence of monarchy in 2009, *Solomon’s Vineyard: Literary and Linguistic Studies in the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: SBL).

23 Yann Martel 2015, “Foreword,” in Elizabeth Smart 1945, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, ix–xvi (London: Fourth Estate), xi.

24 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 7.

25 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 9.

26 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 67.

He is also all things: the night, the resilient mornings, the tall poinsettias and hydrangeas, the lemon trees, the residential palms, the fruit and vegetables in gorgeous rows, the birds in the pepper tree, the sun on the swimming pool.²⁷

He comes through the bamboo bushes like land emerging from chaos. But I am the land, and he is the face upon the waters. He is the moon upon the tides, the dew, the rain, all seeds and all the honey of love.²⁸

More single-purposed than the new bird, all mouth with his one want, I close my eyes and tremble, anticipating the heaven of actual touch.²⁹

This is the state of angels, that spend their hours only singing the praises of the Lord. Just to lie savouring is enough life. Is enough.³⁰

By Grand Central Station and the Song of Songs commune, above all, around a desire to dwell on, and in, the obsessively private and exclusive space of the lovers—while *also* breaking out of the private in the modern sense by letting the whole world into the sensation of love. In *By Grand Central Station*, the shapeshifting lovers become plant, earth, and animal. As the lover-as-sensation takes the amorphous shape(lessness) of land emerging from the primal chaos of the *tehom* and the wind of God upon the waters, the female voice takes herself to the edge of human words, as she does not so much describe as lose herself as “over-run, jungled in [her] bed, infested with a menagerie of desires,” her heart “eaten by a dove” and “a cat scrambl[ing] in the cave of [her] sex” in the “havoc” and chaos of desire.³¹ Similarly, the Song is filled with openings, passageways and channels between the most intimate bodily and domestic interior and worlds in the widest sense.

The relation between the human and the more-than-human natural world in *By Grand Central Station* and the Song is nothing like the (non-)relationship in Romantic art such as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Der Wanderer über den Nebelmeer* (1818), where the courageous and isolated human man masters—and is dwarfed by—the wild sublime, with the tails of his coat flying in the wind at the cliff’s edge. Nor is it anything like the ending of the book of Job, where the incomprehensible untameability of life and divinity is exhibited in a parade of the most absurd, wild, violent and monstrous exhibits from the natural world. The human figures are not dwarfed. They do not exert dominion or

27 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 37.

28 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 35.

29 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 34.

30 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 39.

31 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 12.

experience the unique isolation of “being human.” They are not overwhelmed and forced into the silence of non-knowing, like the reader at the end of Job. Instead, their bodies and sensations are amplified in a relationship with the open that is reciprocally tender, nurturing, and intimate, even as the natural world takes them far outside and beyond the edges of their own skin.³² The portals and channels in the Song allow the humans at the center of the poem to effortlessly step and slip from the micro-here to the macro-there, with no society, no crowd, no structures, no impediments in between.³³ The lovers move through miraculous openings which take them straight from the most intimate space of bodily interiors, wombs, sexual organs, couches, beds, and the “mother’s house,” to the “world” in its most expansive sense: the open air, the natural world of plants, animals, birds, air, smells and atmospheres through which the bodies move and into which they dissolve.

These acts of confusion and infusion can only be reductively described using terms like “simile” or “metaphor.” The concept of metaphor (from *metaphorēin*: to transfer, carry over; change, alter; to use a word in a strange sense, from *meta* “over, across” and *pherein* “to carry, bear”) is on the right track, as the term implies movement. But metaphor is usually a method of defamiliarization, of making strange: making this place, this thing, this figure stranger, without ever losing a sense of where we really are, and what it/he/she really is. The mobility here is more profound, like the wanderings of the two figures in the landscape who change as they look for each other and hunt out ever stranger forms, and figures, into which to metamorphosize and decompose. The poetics goes far beyond simply adorning human figures in figurative language. Rather it suggests a synaesthetic confusion of taste, flavour, touch, sight and smell—and also metamorphosis, alchemy: chemical transformations between different states of solid, liquid and gas (smoke, perfume, and incense). One could even say, without trying to falsely theologize the Song, that this is a poetics of something like transubstantiation, or the eucharist. The man does not become a god, but he does become wine and food (and incense), taken into her body, to sustain her, to save her. The female body is also ingested. *Her* kisses are like wine that glides over lips and teeth. The TV series *American Gods* also suggested this “heretical” but deeply apposite reading, weaving the

32 Elaine T. James 2007, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (New York: Oxford University).

33 Larger social forms (for example kinship structures, or the crowd) and the built environment are subordinate to the lovers, as metaphors or figures of comparison. The exception—the watchmen/brothers as the force of law and surveillance—is discussed in section 5 below.

Song and eucharistic imagery together in a desperately sexy scene with a black and extremely beautiful red-robed goddess-priest.³⁴

The loving commentary on the Song in *By Grand Central Station* exposes how the Song functions as a particular form of the “private” worlds of lyric poetry, which is never more intimate, interior, and self-obsessed than when expressing the absolute loss of self in love. Even as the Song is about nothing but the love and sensation between two people, it is very far away from the “individual” or “private” in the modern sense, with a very different imagination of space. There is no individual, no human, no secure human; just the posthuman or maybe the pre-human, dissolving into the environment, the wider ecology, and other forms of the living and not-living-but-moving: fawns, gazelles, ewes, doves, lions, leopards, roses, lilies, henna blossoms, trees, wood and smoke, shadows and shade.

Refusing the hierarchies of society—indeed refusing society altogether—the male figure shapeshifts between king and shepherd, figure, voice, atmosphere, fragrance and animal. He is a voice and a name: a name that is poured out like perfume, and that mixes with the more literal oils with which he anoints his body. It is typical for the Song to turn the body inside-out in this way. As the lovers move through doors and openings, and those openings become openings in their own bodies, the more-than-metaphors flow from inside to outside, then back again. As if by an entirely natural process, his voice turns into oil with which he anoints his skin. He is a gazelle: a gazelle gazing in at the windows, looking in through the lattice, trying to cross the thin line or membrane that separates inside and outside. His speech is sweet. He is myrrh, a bag of myrrh between her breasts. He is an atmosphere. He is air. He is in the air—and the air is in the day, in a world where humans dissolve and the personified day breathes (Song 2:17). He is a column of smoke, coming up from the wilderness: a burst of perfume, or fragrant powders—and power. He is a beautiful sculpture, like the miraculously mobile sculptures of Daedalus. His body is ivory, encrusted with sapphires, set on legs of alabaster. His wavy locks are black as a raven. He is a tree, an apple tree, metamorphosing into a vine. But he is also the cooling shade and shadow given by the tree as he “the tree” flows out into the sensation and shelter—the effect of the tree on the eyes and the skin.

The Song, sensed through the senses of the woman (I’m deliberately not saying focalized through the eyes of the woman, because vision is only a part of the synaesthetic sensation of the Song), is uncertain about space because *he is the space*. Other biblical texts are filled with men, in a sometimes choking

34 *American Gods*, 2019, Season 2, episode 7, minute 6, “Treasure of the Sun,” directed by Paco Cabezas.

atmosphere of patriarchy. Here, she fills the space with the projection of her sense of him, the sensation of him. He is the place where she can sit and eat and be refreshed from the fruits (all the apples, grapes, raisins, tastes and refreshment) that drop or pour or flow from him. He is her. Her eyes are doves. His eyes are also doves besides springs of water, bathed in milk. She is also a dove, with a human face (Heb. *panim*) but a face that is hidden, like the face of God, as she hides in a rock. Like him, she is a tree—a palm tree, with breasts like clusters of dates, and also breasts like fawns, and breasts like clusters of the vine, and cheeks like pomegranates, and hair like a flock of goats streaming or cascading down the hills of Gilead. She is fluid—even more than him. Her kisses are wine; her lips distil nectar; she is a channel and she is a fountain; honey and milk are under her tongue; her fingers drip. Her channel is an orchard of pomegranate and a mixture of oil, fruits and spices: nard or spike-nard, anointing oil, henna. As his name-as-perfume mixes with the more literal oils with which he anoints his body, so her body also turns, or pours, inside out, just like his. In an attempt to describe the sensation of her channel or opening, the poet reaches for all the liquids, creams, and spices used for tattooing, decorating, oiling, beautifying and perfuming the surface of the skin.

4 Second Turn to Politics: Illegal Sex, the Mann Act and the Police

One can imagine the lovers in the Song echoing Elizabeth Smart's prayer: "All I want is for everyone to go away and leave me a thousand lives in which to muse, only to muse, on this state of completion."³⁵ One can imagine them sharing her desire not to share—to put "the whole untidy world into a nest," letting it "swing ... comfortably as if it were [] far away."³⁶ while at the same time dissolving outwards into the worlds of the "woodsorrel and the mourning dove, who deal only with eternals, [and] know nothing of the thorny sociabilities of human living."³⁷ But a book written during the Second World War and published in 1945 carries inevitable guilt about retreating and expanding infinitely into the solipsistic worlds of swimming pools and hotel rooms, keeping the socio-political far in the distance.

In the Song, "politics" remains an unknown unknown, in this poem without a date. We have no way of knowing if this poem was crafted in a space or time anywhere near any major historical events and crises and if it constitutes some

35 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 37.

36 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 68.

37 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 15–16.

kind of escape. In contrast, *By Grand Central Station* is haunted by the date of its publication, and Smart's attempt to deal with this is as gauche as Luther's political reading of the Song of Songs. From the safety of North America, to which her British lover and his wife have travelled, at Smart's expense, to flee war in Japan and "smitten Europe," Smart feels compelled to occasionally mention the war—but does so by gathering the thousands (and millions) of sufferers into the "thousand lives" of sensation within.³⁸ The "havoc" of love unleashed and contained in pastoral comparisons to woodsorrel, hydrangeas, angels, lemon trees, and honey is occasionally disturbed by distanced references to a far more widespread chaos: "The stream of our kiss put a waterway around the world, where love like a refugee sailed in the last ship."³⁹ Or again:

There are not too many bereaved or wounded but I can comfort them, and those 5,000,000 who never stop dragging their feet and bundles and babies with bloated bellies across Europe are not too many or too benighted for me to say, Here's a world of hope, I can spare a whole world for each and every one, like a rich lady dispensing bags of candy at a poor children's Christmas feast ... "Seal me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm, for love is as strong as death."⁴⁰

The Song can get away with leaving "ten thousand" and other others as a faceless entourage. Smart cannot. Love may be as strong as death—but the metaphorical appropriation of mass migration and starvation threatens to break the reader's empathy with the elitist exclusivity of love which makes the lovers feel so aristocratic, so removed, so transcendent, so gracious, so complete, so satisfied, so self-sufficient, so able to give while needing nothing—in short, just like the sovereign unmoved mover of Western Metaphysics.⁴¹

Politics and law and the "thorny sociabilities of human living" encroach in a far more compelling way in an autobiographical encounter between the Song of Songs, Smart, Law and the Police. The most intense and incantatory invocations of the Song come in a disturbing scene where Smart is imprisoned, humiliated and assaulted by the police at the Arizona border in 1940. The two lovers are arrested to protect them and the state of Arizona from *illegal sex*:

38 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 25.

39 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 27.

40 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 40.

41 Here, I mean the model of divinity in Western metaphysics: the unmoved mover, omnipotent and transcendent.

But at the Arizona border they stopped us and said Turn Back, and I sat in a little room with barred windows while they typed.

What relation is this man to you? (My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies.)

How long have you known him (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies.)

Did you sleep in the same room? (Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant, also our bed is green).

Did intercourse take place? (I sat down under his shadow with great delight and his fruit was sweet to my taste.)

When did intercourse first take place? (The king hath brought me to the banqueting house and his banner over me was love.)

Are you intending to commit fornication in Arizona? (He shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.)

Behold thou art fair my beloved, behold thou art fair: thou hast dove's eyes.

Get away from there! cried the guard, as I wept by the crack of the door. Better not try any funny business, cried the guard, and struck me.⁴²

In this war of idiom, terminology and language, the Song of Songs is used as a safe and soft parenthesis, a place of refuge. The inspector types and puts his judgment down on six carbon copies: "the girl's a religious maniac" and her lover is a "cad." Elizabeth makes a bold attempt to destabilize the complacent bureaucracy of law by speaking in the idioms of religion and the old biblical poetry of the Song—words at an entirely different pitch to the "epistemological decorum" of law.⁴³ "What do you live for then [if not for passion]? I don't go for that sort of thing, the officer said. I'm a family man, I belong to the Rotary club."⁴⁴ "Are all Americans virgin and faithful ever after? At parties, inspector, surely you know at parties."⁴⁵ "Are all Americans chaste? All, by law. And every man hath his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night. (And by night I sought him whom my soul loveth)."⁴⁶ "Get wise to yourself Solomon, lay off

42 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 43–44.

43 For the power of "epistemological decorum" and a discussion of truth as a matter of correct tone, pitch and style, see Stephen Shapin 1994, *The Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago).

44 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 45.

45 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 47.

46 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 46.

all that stuff. Join a club. Get pally with the gang.”⁴⁷ The poetry of the Song rises up against social and legal censorship and the police as soulless and sexless caricatures.

Smart’s ironic rendition of the laws of theology and the “secular” state—that all Americans must be “chaste ... by law” and register as “virgin” or “faithful”—is no hyperbole given the shocking legal context. She and her lover were imprisoned in 1940 *when they were both aged twenty-seven*. They were arrested in fulfillment of the words of the legal scripture of the Mann Act of 1913, prohibiting interstate transportation of women and girls “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any immoral purpose.” Though the Act was ostensibly designed to prohibit trafficking and “white slavery,” the broad terminology deliberately allowed for the criminalization of consensual sex between any adults unable to supply the legal paperwork proving that they were married to one another. (The Act has never been repealed, though the legal scripture underwent revisions in 1978 and 1986.) Smart hears this secular force of law as generalizing and enforcing the accusing vocabularies of “sin” and “adultery” which she knows so well from her Catholic upbringing and her mother’s house, which was far more hostile than the nurturing womb of safety implied by allusions to the “mother’s house” in the Song. But the female speaker identifies with—even as she is attacked by—the symbolic refuge/arsenal of Christianity. Christ-like, and more than a little Pauline, she presents herself as embodying life and love and passion above and beyond the law. Metaphorizing herself as a female messiah, she depicts herself as divinized, martyred and crucified by the “hatred of the mediocre for miracles.” In a pantheistic eco-theology she is absolved by the cathedral redwoods:

Absolve me, I prayed, up through the cathedral redwoods, and forgive me if this is sin. But the new moss caressed me and the water over my feet and the ferns approved me with endearments: My darling, my darling, lie down with us now for you are also earth which nothing but love can sow.⁴⁸

The Song of Songs, her most profound inner-biblical ally, amplifies the comfort of the cathedral redwoods and the force of love/passion that exists before, above and outside the law.

47 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 46.

48 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 15.

5 The Brothers and the Watchmen: Atmospheres of Law

Smart invokes the Song as the space of compassion and comfort: a soft force to combat the typed legalese of the “inspectors,” papers, oppressive legal Scriptures and the six carbon copies of the law. She seems to forget that the Song contains its own internal keepers of the border (or walls). The poem that focuses so intently on the dove-eyes of the lovers is not entirely free of watching eyes, and forces of surveillance, sexual regulation, censure, opposition, and law. These forces are expressed in the figures of the watchmen, the sentinels, the brothers, walls, and the “keepers of the walls.”

An atmosphere filled with the fragrance and voice of a woman’s male lover *can* be read as an antidote to the choking atmosphere of patriarchy that pervades so much biblical literature. In a course I used to teach on feminism and the Bible, I made a hand-drawn cartoon of Feminist Biblical Interpretation on holiday with Ruth and the woman of the Song, all in swim-suits, holding cocktails under a parasol. Gently mocking the British habit of taking package holidays in the same familiar sunny places, I joked about taking a two-week package holiday from the difficult labor of feminist critique on the Costa del Song of Songs. My Costa del Song of Songs analogy was not exactly wrong. The Song can be seen as the narrative negative of a pornoprophetic text like Hosea 1–3.⁴⁹ In Hosea 1–3, the woman is marked by the “adultery” between her breasts (Hos. 2:2), like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne marked with an “A” for “adultery.” In the Song, nothing but the myrrh lover—with no judgement and no signification—lies between the woman’s breasts. Hosea documents the imprisonment and punishment of the woman-nation, ending in a brief glimpse of a restoration to a viable and flourishing relationship that looks sinister in context—like the repentance of an abuser (Hos 2:21–23). The Song is suffused with love and delight and appetite and desire. But just as Hosea has its moment of hope, so the Song offers momentary and disturbing glimpses of the forces of surveillance and disciplinary violence that the Song runs so fast to escape, transcend, outpace.

Though the Song is focalized and sensed through the eyes and body of a woman on the move, there are dark hints that “sexual freedom and its spatial correlate (free wandering) is a male prerogative.”⁵⁰ The shadowy male figures

49 Cf. Fokkelien Dijk-Hemmes 1989, “The Imagination of Power and the Power of Imagination: An Intertextual Analysis of Two Biblical Love Songs: The Song of Songs and Hosea 2,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44: 75–88; Yvonne Sherwood 2000 (1996), *The Prostitute and the Prophet* (London: Continuum).

50 Ilana Pardes 1993, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University), 133.

hint at a third world, a social world ghosting between the two main spaces of the Song (human intimacy and ecology/environment). The woman is open, out in the open, in a space where she can turn into anything: plant, animal, air and man. But she is also anxious, demure, secretive, seen, watched, in fear of being shamed. The woman desires to open—and she is a locked garden; a dammed-up stream, a sealed fountain. Her dripping fingers are suggestively on the door handle—but then there are the brothers who say of their “little sister:” “If she is a wall, we will build upon her a battlement of silver; but if she is a door, we will enclose her with boards of cedars” (8:9). The phrase “little sister” hints at social worlds where sisters are always little, and always littler than brothers. The metaphorical building work is far more sinister than the image of a woman’s neck stretched out like a tower, adorned with jewellery like shields. The implication is that she is being walled up, enclosed, shut in. Whereas all other human and built structures are subordinate to the lovers, as metaphors and figures of comparison, the watchmen and the brothers and their structures of “enclosure” form blurred forces of surveillance and opposition that do not dissolve into the lovers’ world.

Like all the other figures in the Song, the watchmen and the walls and the voices of opposition/censure shapeshift and move in a way that makes walls and distinctions between interior and exterior impossible to uphold. The watching eyes express cultural-social-legal forces of prohibition, outside and against the will of the lovers. But they also express those internal forces that regulate sex and exposure by producing the sensations that the Eden myth agonises over: embarrassment and shame. These two forces blur as they do in *By Grand Central Station* when Smart describes the sensation of being watched and judged by the internal and external spectres of the “hordes at the window.” “I must spin good ghosts out of my hope to oppose the hordes at my window. If those who look in see me condescend to barricade the door, they will know too much and crowd in to overcome me.”⁵¹

In a brilliant reading, Ilana Paredes superimposes the watchmen of the Song on the watchmen in Freud’s “topography” of the mind. Freud famously uses spatial metaphors of the psyche. At the center of Freud’s topography of the psychic interior lies the unconscious: the “large entrance hall in which the mental impulses jostle one another like separate individuals.” Adjoining this entrance hall is “a second, narrower, room”: the conscious. “Between these two rooms, a *watchman* performs his function: he examines the different mental

51 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 28.

impulses, acts as a censor, and will not admit them into the drawing-room if they displease him."⁵²

We don't need to sign up to all the old Freudian orthodoxies to feel the truth of this drama of internal censorship, where unruly fantasies and wild dreams spruce themselves up for a more public presentation, at first to the conscious self and then to others. The Song is a space without buildings, structures and walls—or only hints at the walls that must be there somewhere in order for there to be so many doors, windows and openings. And yet, paradoxically, there is also a sense of superegoic censure, inhibition, crossing thresholds, crossing lines. This sense of transgression is intrinsic to the human experience and pleasure of sexuality. Performances of sexual freedom and openness so often play with the drama of overcoming taboos and forces of repression. There is something kinky about being looked at, disapprovingly, and being censored. Ovid wrote about the pleasures of flirting with a woman while her husband was watching—which may have been what enraged his friend the Emperor Augustus—and sexual players often play with the judging eye of religion and the police. Postlapsarian humans are in no place to imagine human sexuality without the dynamics of prohibition and permission and permissiveness and the shy audacity of sex. In an infinite space where all was truly open (without limit) and perfectly free, without any limit, without any censure, we would lose some of the essential dynamics of sex. The need for transgression and censure is never stronger than when we imagine ourselves in the (modern?) process of becoming more progressive, open, and sexually free.

Unlike the other humans in the story, the watchmen's bodies do not dissolve or metaphorize very easily. They refuse to become nothing more than projections of the woman's sexual psyche, or accessories to the lovers' shared drama of sexual pleasure/transgression. At one point they turn into a very real materialization of the hostile law. In a poetic world where no one touches her (apart from her lover, who only gets to touch her sometimes), the male forces that are shapeless, nameless shadows, become for all their shapelessness very real bodies with the power to beat her, wound her, and take away her veil/mantle (4:7). They expose her and humiliate her. The beating breaks into the idyll of the Song like the iconic and horrific photo of the "woman in the blue bra" in Cairo in 2011, beaten and stripped of her abaya because she dared to join the public protests in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring.

52 Sigmund Freud 1957, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth), 295; Ilana Paredes 1993, 137.

6 Third Turn to Politics: The Song as Contemporary Collage

The Song is already like a surrealist montage, with glimpses of place-names and outlines superimposed on one another, and strange anatomies of the body. Plants, fruits, birds and animals are superimposed on the faces and bodies of the lovers as in the bizarre composites of Guiseppe Arcimbaldo, and pictures of streams of goats are pasted on the woman's hair.⁵³ It seems strangely appropriate, therefore, to continue to work on the collage by adding cut-outs and images from contemporary politics and "the news." I imagine this composite collage as something like the work of Karl Schwitters, Hannah Hoch or Man Ray.

Moving into spaces beyond the protective walls of traditional biblical criticism, I want to ask, like Luther, how the Song can signify and make an impact publicly and politically, while also questioning categories of utility and productivity, public and private. Rather than allegorizing madly, I want to base my reflections on four interlinked features of the poem and its interpretative history. These are: 1) The overwhelming *sensation* of moving and mutating bodies; a drama of love and sex and touching without clear identities and outlines; 2) the infusion and confusion of the human and the natural world; 3) the marked and sometimes painful tension between space/freedom and hints and blows of censure and regulation 4) the lesson, or call, of this "space without politics," this Song which is all about the private and the natural, for a contemporary world entirely saturated by the social and social media and optimized identities, where one has to work to recapture attention and space. I want to use the poem as a text to think with, dealing with each of these features in turn, in a series of reflections between the ancient text and modern spaces. Rather than imagining these as antonyms, I let the two speak to one another about movement and movements; about the human and the natural; about space and regulation; and about the management and repression/articulation of sex.

6.1 *Movement(s)*

The incessant movement and mutation of bodies in the Song can be read as an allegory or prophecy that seems to have been lying, quietly, in relative obscurity, waiting for precisely this moment: this moment when so much mutation has taken place, just recently, in my lifetime, in representable, legal, visible, sexual practises, identities and offences. The inventory of recent issues and identities seems infinite (though so much is still missing): LGBTQI+ rights and "gay marriage;" the pill; abortion; Roe v. Wade and the overturning of Roe v.

53 For a now classic study of the Song and the grotesque, see Fiona Black 2009.

Wade, with the Salito judgement appealing to a spectacular legal fundamentalism, akin to scriptural fundamentalism (“The Constitution makes no mention of abortion”);⁵⁴ divorce; surrogacy; IVF; the emergence of (and violent backlash against) rape and domestic violence as legal categories—and then just recently, as if just yesterday, the seemingly sudden public emergence of transgender identities, which is to say the question of metamorphosis and essence and the relation between the essential/natural/given and the chosen. Are bodies a biological given, and/or can they, like the mutable bodies in the Song, move and be changed?⁵⁵

Uniquely in the USA, politics has taken such an aggressive turn into an overtly sexual politics that sexuality and gender can no longer be seen as a sidebar to politics proper, or marginal issues. A very public Manichean battle—#MeToo and Kavanaugh, *Handmaid*-style protests against extreme anti-abortion legislation and the divine powers of the Supreme Court—has taken center stage. At the same time, the Christian groups often presented as most static and conservative are also rapidly moving and innovating. A conservative Christian sexual ethic now rarely falls back on the old and once commonplace argument that marriage is only for reproduction, opposing family/children to desire. Few now say, with Elizabeth Smart’s policeman, that they “don’t go in for that sort of thing”⁵⁶ and present themselves as choosing family and Rotary Club over sex. Conservative Christian communities now try to capture and amplify the language of desire and sexual fulfilment, often claiming that the dynamic of chastity followed by marriage leads to a pleasure in sex that cannot be enjoyed, or even imagined, by the unchaste.⁵⁷ Christian sex manuals and an online fantasy-sharing site for Christian couples (“Marriage Heat”) promote “hot monogamy.” An online Bible-reading guide to the Song of Songs teaches young people that “God created sexual desire as a gift for humans to enjoy.” Fortunately, the two lovers “use its correct application” and the Song highlights “right timing”: “Though both lovers are immensely captivated by each other, the woman methodically reminds the readers to wait for this special passion at the right time.”⁵⁸

54 Justice Samuel Alito May 3, 2022, “Full Text: Leaked Roe v. Wade Draft Ruling,” *The Spectator*.

55 For one of many discussions of this pressing contemporary problematic, see Rogers Brubaker 2015, *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities* (Princeton: Princeton University).

56 Elizabeth Smart 1945, 45.

57 Amy Derogatis 2014, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University).

58 bibleproject.com/learn/song-of-songs, accessed May 1, 2021.

In this bleak modern Christian typology, the *woman* of the Song of Songs becomes a symbol of the one-who-waits. The task of waiting and issuing “methodical reminders” falls on the shoulders of the young woman, not the young man, whose sexual urges are, according to popular mythology, far stronger and far less easily contained. This is a very bleak reading of the Song where “Love, not marriage, is what they propose, and the woman ... does most of the proposing,” issuing the first urgent invitation and declaring that his lovemaking (*dodim*) is better than wine (Song 1:2).⁵⁹ The unbearable pressure placed on the waiting bodies of young girls is reinforced by new rituals of Purity Balls and the “silver ring thing,” where the emphasis (creepily) is on the purity of daughters, entrusted to their fathers until it can be passed to a Christian husband.⁶⁰ But as Christian evangelicals adapt to fast-changing public sexual practices, celibacy and purity movements awkwardly coexist with LGBTQI+ movements emerging from influential evangelical Christian colleges (e.g. Baylor University, Wheaton, and Westmont), and “sex positive” Christian movements like Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber’s vision of a Sexual Reformation and a House for all Sinners and Saints.⁶¹ There is so much movement, so many new movements, so much formation and re-formation, so much flux. In such times the Song could be liberated from its traditional place as a canonical misfit and an “obscure book” to a book that *represents* a Bible that (contra its carefully managed public image) has never been a manual of “Christian” family values or the nuclear modern family in any straight or straightforward sense.

Ilana Pardes asks why anyone bothered to go to such allegorical trouble to keep the Song—and argues persuasively that it was kept and canonized because there was such a desperate desire for positive images of the relationship between God and his people, and for positive sex acts, out in the open.⁶² In the Bible, the illicit/illegal/perverted sex acts are visible, paraded under the dark gaze of judgement. Life-giving, joyful pleasure is kept undercovers, off-page. “The Prophets engage in detailed description of Israel’s promiscuity, but say very little about her sexual desire at eschatological moments when she regrets her sins and reunites with the bridegroom,” Pardes complains.⁶³ The

59 Chana Bloch 2006, 151, 155.

60 See Sara Moslener 2015, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University), and Sara Moslener 2017, “Material World: Gender and the Bible in Evangelical Purity Culture,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Anna Fisk, 608–621 (Oxford: Oxford University).

61 See for example Nadia Bolz-Weber 2019, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* (New York: Convergent Books).

62 Ilana Pardes 1993, 124.

63 Ilana Pardes 1993, 135.

time of God's functional and happy-ever-after times with his people seem to be forever pushed to the future or the past, off-text, or off-screen.

Without in any way wanting to be misunderstood as saying that there is too much public emphasis on issues of rape, domestic violence, misogyny, human trafficking and modern slavery (there is never enough—the number of rape cases prosecuted in the UK is rapidly falling for example), it is important to ask how to draw attention to these issues while at the same time ensuring that our cultures and our children do not become overwhelmingly fixated on the dark side of sex. The same young girls in evangelical Protestant communities targeted by silver ring ceremonies and chastity cultures are also circulating on their Instagram accounts memes from campaigns led by Exodus Cry and #Traffickinghub against human trafficking and the sexual abuse of children. As with the Mann Act, these campaigns and organizations get traction by appealing to the common cultural good of preventing trafficking and child sex exploitation—a campaign which no one in their right mind would oppose. But they then elide these sex crimes into pornography and sexual promiscuity (broadly defined as all sex outside of Christian heterosexual marriage). The long-term Protestant emphasis on the Prophets over the “Catholic” Song has now turned very dark indeed,⁶⁴ with young people absorbing the censure and dark representation of sex, while still waiting for their own personal trips to the pleasure garden. We need to take great care in educating young people on rape and abuse—ensuring that that they also see, hear and sense, through their multiple portals, screens and channels, positive images of un-airbrushed sexy human bodies and praise for pleasurable, engrossing, good and happy sex.

6.2 *Beyond the Anthropocene and the Obsession with Sexual Bodies in Social/Legal Space*

The design of the space of the Song—with its openings between the human body and the natural world, with little trace of intervening society—looks like a bespoke forum for pushing public Christian teaching beyond a relentless obsession with discrete sexual bodies and how they conform (or not) to divine and biblical rules. There is nothing discrete about the human bodies in the Song, which are fused with and dependent on the world of plants, animals, birds, air, smells and atmospheres through which the bodies move and into which they dissolve. As Generation Z evangelicals form organizations such as Young Evangelicals for Climate Change, the Song has the power to deflect attention away from the public stranglehold of “sexual ethics,” as if this has

64 Cf. Carole R. Fontaine 2006.

always been the Bible, or God's, overwhelming obsession.⁶⁵ It seems *naturally* fitting (far more fitting than Luther's tortured allegories of government, or attempts to turn the Song into an allegory of the Church) to make a new collage of the ever-mobile Song where it is cut and pasted with movements such as Extinction Rebellion or the Green New Deal.

To the powerful commentaries that have already been written on the ecology of the Song,⁶⁶ I would like to add just two points, or footnotes. First, the Song seems to offer a particularly radical version of the post-human, that explodes all traditional ways of conceptualizing the place of the human in the word. In traditional "Western" philosophy/theology the "human" agonises over himself (my use of the masculine pronoun is deliberate) and finds his home in the ambiguous and unsettling space of "animal+" and "divinity-". From Gilgamesh to Eden, Aristotle to Prometheus, the human is presented as suspended awkwardly "between a celestial and terrestrial nature," (as Agamben puts it in *The Open: Man and Animal*) "always more and less than himself."⁶⁷ The agonized subject is the man, not the human. (The female is often imagined as an antithesis to man, closer to the animal.) Most importantly, the volatility of man's essence is relatively managed and contained. He, the man, moves between just three poles of orientation, three nodal points of the living: God, human, and animal. It's as if it is all a carefully contained game.

In Western theology and philosophy, it would seem absurd to include plants as point of comparison or transformation. There is no (con)fusion between blood and sap, as in the Mayan tradition where, for example, *balche* is described as "the green blood of my daughter," cassava as the "thigh of the earth" and mixtures are made of man, god and maize.⁶⁸ But in the Song the human is masculine and feminine and opens into plants, trees, flowers and also smells, atmospheres (wood, spice, powder, oil, henna, cinnamon, roses lilies, myrrh) and all forms of birds and animal, from doves to leopards to fawns to gazelles. The openness of the Song is far more open than the carefully managed volatility usually permitted to the human in the "Western" philosophical and theological canon. All the lines of classification that we might expect are opened in dramatic and potentially radical ways. The Song is not centered on

65 See for example James Bruggers Sept 25, 2020, "What to Make of Some Young Evangelicals Abandoning Trump over Climate Change?" *Inside Climate News*, insideclimatenews.org, accessed July 3, 2021.

66 Elaine T. James 2017.

67 Giorgio Agamben 2003, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University), 29.

68 See Inga Clendinnen 1987, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in the Yucatan, 1517–1570* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University), esp. 137, 153.

the human. It is neither anthropocentric nor gynocentric. This space where the human dissolves into plant, animal and atmosphere seems to indicate a strange time-out from the geological epoch of the Anthropocene. The Song is centered on a paradox of embodiment-disembodiment. *Two human bodies are central—and “the human” is not central at all.* The space is post-human and pre-human. Human bodies and interiors meld with the green of the environment: “our couch is green” (Song 1:16, author’s translation).

My second addition to the debate on the Song and ecology concerns the pressing sensation of air. There are few works of literature where the air becomes such a tangible presence, something that gently forces itself on the senses. Through soft nouns like fragrance, scent and smoke, the poetry pushes air out of the invisible and negligible. In a different way, in the contemporary environment air has been forced into a tangible presence in all the campaigns against the agricultural and industrial pollutants that contaminate the air that enters our lungs and bloodstream and soaks into our skin. I am particularly sensitized to the presence of air in the Song, since my skin has become highly sensitized to industrial chemicals in the air, ever since a visit to a polluted lake in North America, and since, as a long-covid sufferer, I have become far more self-conscious about what it means to breathe. I am now even more struck by the intimate connection between the human the atmosphere in the Song and the way in which life pulses to the one fundamental breath—like the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen. The human dissolves into the atmosphere and the personified day “breathes” (2:17).

6.3 *Atmospheres of Law: The Tension between Sexual Pleasure and Law/Regulation/Surveillance*

One of the most thought-provoking features of the Song is the tension between space/freedom and the watchmen of censure and regulation. It is productive to compare this dialectic to the dialectics of space and regulation in contemporary highly developed states and legal systems. In his article “Atmospheres of Law: Senses, Affects, Lawscape,” Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos argues that the modern “city is so thick with law that the law is not perceived.” “The law is spread on pavements, covers the walls of buildings ... lets you dress in a certain way (and not others), eat in a certain way, smell, touch or listen to certain things, touch other people in a certain way (and not others) ... move in a certain way, stay still in a certain way.”⁶⁹ Perhaps what it means to live in modern urbanized societies and “cities” is precisely this: to live in an

69 Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2013, “Atmospheres of law: Senses, Affects, Lawscapes,” in *Emotion, Space and Society* 7: 35–44.

environment that is *thick* with law: building and property laws, family and divorce law, equality laws, laws of immigration, and laws on freedom of speech.

In the Song, the city is in the distance, and there is no city in this legal sense. Figures of surveillance, censorship and maybe even law infiltrate the seeming open air, undermining the fantasy of a space without structure and regulation: a space that is entirely *free*. The Song is still a landscape, not a lawscape. But we could say that hints and allegories of law are in the atmosphere, mixing with the other main constituents of the atmosphere: the smoke, perfume, incense and the lover's honey speech. In contrast, modernity is the epoch which defines itself politically as the time when (the) people broke with repressive old sovereigns (kings and gods) and found relative safety and accountability in the human (secular) realms of law and politics (far safer than theology and kings). But modern states and legal systems have powers of which old gods and lawmakers could not even dream.⁷⁰

In the Song, the reader feels the presence of walls, more or less metaphorical: the walled garden, the woman as wall, and the "keepers of the walls." But these keepers of the walls are nothing like the police at the border of the state of Arizona, with the powers to imprison Elizabeth Smart for illegal sex. Modern readers often ask what is meant by notorious old Bible sex verses such as Paul's vice lists or the verses in Leviticus against lying with a man as with a woman (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; also Romans 1:26–27). But they should also ask what powers God and his priestly representatives had at their disposal to enforce their views of ideal and prohibited sex. Ancient deities and pre-modern societies had no police force, no FBI, no resources for mass incarceration, no elaborate surveillance systems, and above all no legal scriptures with the force of Acts that once passed would remain as indelible as the most intense fantasies of fundamentalist scripture: in *force*, until amended or repealed.

Jessica Pliley shows how the Mann Act and the crusade against trafficking facilitated increased policing of women's sexual behaviour, and also led to the exponential growth in the visibility, powers, prestige and remit of the FBI.⁷¹ In 1910, when the Mann Act was passed, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had no more than a few dozen agents. Through the Mann Act and the crusade against sexual immorality, it grew to a formidable law enforcement organization able to conscript the co-operation of state and municipal authorities, with

70 For development of this argument see Yvonne Sherwood 2018, "The Impossibility of Theocracy: The Weakness of the Gods," in *Challenging Theocracy: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics* ed. David Tebachnik, Toivo Koivukoski, and Herminio Meireles Teixeira, 217–263 (Toronto: University of Toronto).

71 Jessica R. Pliley 2014, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University).

powers to enter private bedrooms and homes. Police forces, prisons, bureaus of investigations and lawyers thrive on problems, threats and antagonisms to address. One of the reasons why rampant sexual immorality and the control of women's bodies became such a high profile public issue in the USA—far more than in many other developed countries—was because the FBI used sexual immorality to establish itself.

Modernity's fantasy of itself as the space of freedom and expansion that could not have been imagined by pre-modern societies is compelling at the level of transport and technology—but far less convincing when expanded into the realm of the practice and idea of “being free.” In the Song, we have no idea whether the lovers are married or not; whether they like to have sex with women and/or men and whether this is an issue for them; and whether they have one partner or more. In contrast, modern sex is mapped according to sexual identities and statuses, legally consecrated through papers (for example papers of marriage and divorce). Most modern sexual identities came into being through a process of prohibition, criminalization—and then decriminalization. Examples of this pattern of creation through regulation include the “homosexual” and the “divorcee.” Like the air and the atmosphere, the law and the force of law are invisible to most, remaining a secret known only to those who have wanted to move and change their life scripts (by leaving a partner or moving countries, for example) and who have found, often to their shock, that there are scripts about them and those they love that are a very long way from the life they want to live. Forced to engage with family law, I was disturbed to find that marriage is a legal sacrament (from which one has to “pray” for release in the UK); that law has no qualms about making sovereign pronouncements about the relative status of mothers and fathers and enforcing a belief in the benign nurturing powers of the “mother's house”; and that the state actively manages marriage and the family, discouraging divorce and nudging couples into marriage through financial incentives and tax relief.⁷²

The invisible forces of law have never been subjected to the kind of attacks mounted against pre-modern Gods and Scriptures. Maybe the critique of religion has been salvific in that it has deflected and concentrated critique, thereby saving other spheres. No one is surprised to learn that religious scriptures are unsystematic and seem to express conflicting histories and agendas that can be traced to competing (partisan) historical interests. These are oft-repeated anthems of the Enlightenment critique of religion, bedded down

72 See further Yvonne Sherwood 2017, “The Impossibility of Queering the Mother: New Sightings of the Virgin Mother in the ‘Secular’ State,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Anna Fisk, 651–686 (Oxford: Oxford University).

for several centuries, and frequently replayed, over and over again. But this very public debate masks the fact that a very similar problematic—the tension between claims to fundamentalist authoritarian truth and clear evidence of contingency and non-systematicity—could be directed at law. Arguably, a public critique of law would be far more important, since legal Acts and conventions are far more resistant to change than Scriptures and exert a truly fundamentalist authority (far more extensive than any Scriptures) over all citizens in the state. Like “*ta biblia*,” law is messy and often conflicted. The Mann Act, ostensibly passed to protect women and young girls from exploitation, is fundamentally in conflict with US state marriage laws that permit the marriage (which is to say rape) of children, mostly girls, and which are proving highly resistant to change. According to the campaign *Unchained at Last* (an organization with far less public visibility than other public campaigns, including #traffickinghub), 207,468 minors “married” in the USA between 2000 and 2015, some as young as ten or eleven. Most of these, nearly ninety percent, were girls marrying much older men. The youngest were three ten-year-old girls in Tennessee who married men aged twenty-four, twenty-five and thirty-one in 2001. Children as young as twelve were granted marriage licences in Alaska, Louisiana and South Carolina, while thirteen-year-olds were allowed to marry in eleven other states.

In his book *American Child Bride*, Nicholas Syrett points to “a long history of marriage laws being used to circumvent legal repercussions of sexual activity with a minor.”⁷³ Besides being used as a legal loophole, able to transform rape into “marriage” (countering one law with another), the state marriage laws are enforced by and enforce “family/Christian” values, which is why they have proved so intractable—even as Human Rights Watch points out that they are out of step with other developed countries and permit marriage at a lower age than in Afghanistan. Chris Christie, the Republican governor for New Jersey opposed a resolution banning child marriage in May 2017 on the grounds that “it would conflict with religious customs” and “violate the cultures and traditions of some communities.” In the BBC documentary *America’s Child Brides*,⁷⁴ a mother addresses the reporter as if she were a secular European anthropologist in Christianland, and explains that the marriage of her young pregnant

73 Nicholas L. Syrett 2016, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (University of North Carolina), 142–164.

74 Chloe Campbell, dir., *American Child Brides* (Sugar Films, 2019), 41 minutes, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p072qyrb>, accessed August 24, 2022.



FIGURE 11.1 'We have a little sister, and she has no breasts. What shall we do for our little sister, on the day when she is spoken for?' (Song 8:8). Shocked passers-by respond to a stunt used to draw attention to the issue of child marriage in New York, 2017
SOURCE: YOU-TUBE

daughter bears witness to the American faith in family values and the Christian institution of marriage.

Modern readers may well smile at celibate interpreters allegorizing their way out of sexual poetry and be shocked by the censure of literalists like Theodore of Mopsuestia or Sebastien Castellio—but modern societies have often been equally demure and punitive about sex, even as they organize identities and papers obsessively around the act of sex and who has had, and who can have, sex with whom. Nowhere is the determination to euphemize and regulate sex clearer than in the history of contraception, one of modernity's obsessions alongside divorce and "being gay." The belated development of effective birth control is a clear example of how modern declarations of freedom have led to reactionary prohibitions and an air thick with law, closing off potential for freedom, and especially women's sexual freedom, as soon as it appears. As Carole Pateman, Joan Scott and others have argued—against the complacent and sometimes even smug idea of the progressive secular—modern

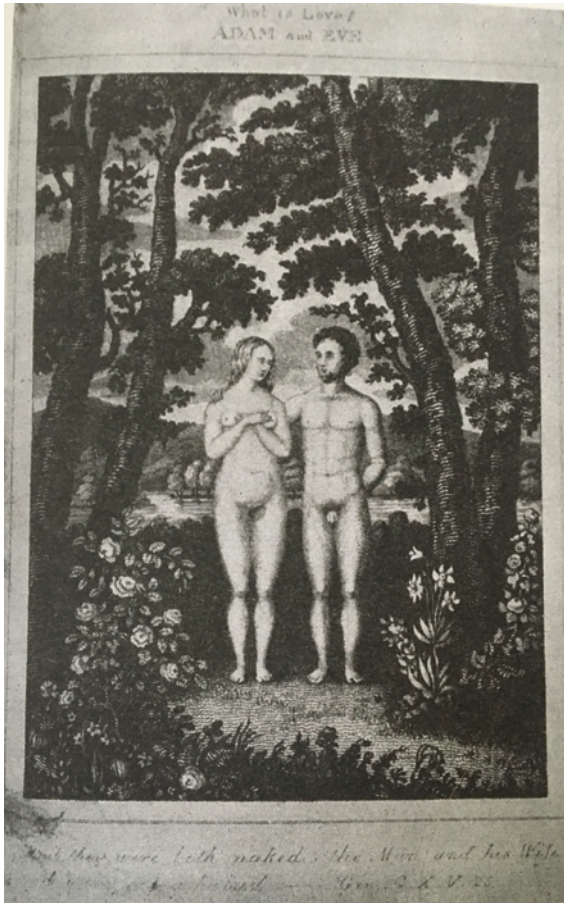


FIGURE 11.2
Richard Carlile's 1826
pamphlet, *Every Woman's
Book or What is Love?*,
frontispiece

declarations of equality and freedom led to increased confinement of women, as “little sisters” confined to the private sphere and excluded from the public/political community, as a modern homofraternal political community replaced the father-king.⁷⁵

Nineteenth-century advocates of birth control were frequently imprisoned for “blasphemy”—a crime that, contra the common myth, *increased* in modernity, just like “obscenity,” as “secular” authorities reacted against the dangers of new freedoms and operated with increased powers of surveillance, prosecution and imprisonment.⁷⁶ Most convicted blasphemers campaigned for sexual

75 Carole Pateman 1988, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, UK: Polity); Joan Wallach Scott 2017, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton: Princeton University).

76 See Yvonne Sherwood 2021, *Blasphemy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University).

freedom—for the most part within monogamous marriage—alongside freedom from institutionalized religion and freedom of the press. The first book to advocate birth control was Richard Carlile's 1826 pamphlet, *Every Woman's Book or What is Love?*, written in prison while he was serving the longest sentence for blasphemy in modern British history: six years.⁷⁷ Because the book has languished as a "forgotten shocker," no one recalls how the early history of birth control appealed to the Song of Songs. The first four unabridged editions included a frontispiece of a naked couple in a garden (which was then dropped from subsequent editions).

The couple were Adam and Eve ("naked but not ashamed") but also the lovers in the Song. The frontispiece conjured a "biblical" world without watchmen, without clothes and without society. With no regard for social and religious convention, the couple forgot to wear (or heard no voices telling them that they should wear) the standard-issue fig leaves. It is as if the couple thought that they were living without surveillance: human (social/legal) or divine.

Writing what he thought of as a recipe or manual for love, a kind of sexual cookbook for women, Carlile invoked the Song of Songs against the oppressive social icon of the Bible and biblical morality. The Bible was more than a dark monotone force of prohibition and a watchman against more modern sexual practices.⁷⁸ Women should take inspiration from the Bible and "that luscious part of it called Solomon's Song"⁷⁹ and the "inspired lady" author who wrote it. "Let us take our fill of love' is one of the best exhortations in the Bible, or that was ever made by a woman to her lover," Carlile declared.⁸⁰ The inspired lady and her lover even helpfully offered some good tips on sexual technique. Drawing on Victorian and Edwardian phrenology, Carlile informed his readers that the cerebellum, the mass of the brain at the nape of the neck, was bigger or smaller depending on one's "propensity to love" and recommended caressing the cerebellum as an erotic zone! The inspired lady of the Song knew this of course, which is why she wrote, with a very satisfied smile on her face: "His left hand should be under my head" (Song 2:6; 8:3, author's translation).

Every Woman's Book is no *The Joy of Sex*. While Carlile argued that "If love were a matter of common conversation, no other ideas would be associated

77 The complete text of Carlile's "neglected shocker" can be found in M.L. Bush, ed., 1998, *What is Love? Richard Carlile's Philosophy of Sex*, (London: Verso). This is the edition I am using here.

78 Carlile also sees the Bible as a source of oppressive laws of religion, but unusually, he tends to blame the New Testament rather than the Old. He finds inspiration in the sexual practises in ancient Israel and blames sex-phobia on (in a horribly anachronistic phrase), that "loveless cripple [sic.] St Paul."

79 M.L. Bush 1998, 60.

80 M.L. Bush 1998, 84.

with it, no other observations would be made upon it, than such as now pass on the gratification of an appetite, such as hunger and thirst, or the taking on of a luxury such as food and wine, etc,”⁸¹ the book clearly reflected the limits of the speakable, and the thick atmospheres of nineteenth-century laws on marriage and sex. Though an advocate of sexual freedom, Carlile promoted nothing more (or less) than what he called “moral marriage.” “Moral marriage” upheld monogamy and marriage—but with some “before” and “after” caveats. A marriage could be ended if the couple were no longer happy. Sexual intimacy should be permitted *before* marriage, so that couples could test their compatibility. This was good “biblical” practice, as demonstrated by the “ancient Israelites,” who were clearly like the liberated modern French(!)

The history of the modern campaign for birth control began with Carlile’s *What is Love?* and his use of the Song of Songs, then extended through a bizarre history of euphemism that could easily rival the interpretative history of the Song. In the 1830’s, Carlile’s transatlantic allies, Dr. Charles Knowlton and Abner Kneeland, were imprisoned for blasphemy for printing and distributing Knowlton’s under-the-table book designed to help his patients and titled *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (1832) and also *Fruits of Philosophy: A Treatise on the Population Question*. The euphemistically-titled *Fruits of Philosophy* was printed in miniature so that (rather like the tiny vernacular Bibles of the Protestant Reformation) it could be hidden in a pocket or the palm of the hand. George Drysdale’s *Elements of Social Science* of 1859 was widely condemned as “Bible of the brothel” and an “obscene biology” because Drysdale scandalously aimed to put the “two sexes almost on a par in sexual freedom” and advocated the sponge and the withdrawal method to enable a woman to “indulge her sexual desires, with the same exemption from the after consequences as a man.” By making a new Declaration of the [sexual] Rights of Man and Woman that still has to set out the very basic truth that “physical truth in its general effect cannot be a moral evil,”⁸² Drysdale made it clear that the very belated history of effective birth control had nothing to do with scientific limits, but with the limits of the thinkable and legal. These limits forced him to conceal his name to protect himself from prosecution and to publish his new treatise on “natural and physical

81 M.L. Bush 1998, 84.

82 George R. Drysdale 1879, *The elements of social science, or physical, sexual and natural religion: an exposition of the true cause and only cure of the three primary social evils, poverty, prostitution, and celibacy, by a doctor of medicine* (London: E. Truelove), 49, wellcomecollection.org, accessed July 1, 2021.

religion" under the euphemistic title "Social Science." The watchmen of public language and the atmospheres of law forced reproductive technologies to shroud themselves in euphemisms such as "the fruits of philosophy," "social science," or neo-Malthusianism and the population problem. When research on the pill began in the 1950's, it started under the code name "PPP."

6.4 *Recovering a Private-Global Life*

As a final reflection, I want to return to my opening statements about the Song—but in the spirit of the Song, *moving* it, trying it in reverse. The fact that the Song seems to be a space without politics may well prove to be its most political aspect. This beautifully disorientating world that is so hard to map (this world lacking the political and public, but also not "private") can help us to resist forms of living where the old modern split between the private and the public has long become meaningless. As Franco "Bifo" Berardi puts it in *The Soul at Work*, "Privacy and its possibilities are abolished. Attention is under siege everywhere. Not silence but uninterrupted noise, not the red desert, but a cognitive space overcharged with nervous incentives to act: this is the alienation of our times."⁸³ Whereas in the Song, interiority and sexuality expand outwards and pervade the landscape, in our saturated environment the reverse is true. The outside now colonizes the "inside" as humans are transformed into carefully curated figures and types: forms that must mean something, signify something, do something, because they cannot simply be left to be, ambiguously, unproductively. In this respect, public mediatized figures of the self are uncannily like all those figures in the Song that the old allegorists forced out of the simple decadent state of being into the labor of signifying, doing some cognitive and theological *work*.

In the Song, bodies dissolve and mutate into animals, plants, perfumes, landscapes, smoke, and the lovers are driven only by a lack of each other. They seem to lack any pressure from the mass-produced lacks (from a lack of perfect teeth to a lack of a perfect credit score) designed to keep citizens of the twenty-first century frenetically moving and earning to constantly upgrade themselves. The lovers play with delicious moments of transition and open and close *channels*, opening to a world that is, for the most part, pure environment. The quiet and simple world of the Song provides an ironic and stark contrast to contemporary "advanced" (hypertensive) economies where most homes have numerous screens, multiple channels (in my house we call them the "toxic

83 Franco "Bifo" Berardi 2009, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Cambridge, MA: MIT).

portals")—openings that are so very hard to close. Lawscapes affect us in far more ways than we realize, managing our sexual identities and marital statuses for example. But the incentives and imperatives that demand response and produce conformity now far exceed the atmospheres of law. Screens and portals in our homes deliver imperatives (calls from work, from appraisal and surveillance structures and feedback loops on "performance")—but also incentives and serial temptations from tracking technologies and the watchmen/corporate platforms that buy and sell our attention and make money by "keeping us in a profitable state of anxiety, envy and distraction."⁸⁴ The channels in our hands and in our homes open us—and far more so, our children—to the multiple mediascapes and mirrors and selfies in which the "I" dissolves into "my image," "my performance," "my home and its interiors" (location, post-code brands, designer interiors), "my capacity," "my social and cultural capital," "my personal brand," including "my career profile" (even as a producer of papers and chapters like this one, that can enhance a university department's international standing and, in the UK, funding), "my credit score," and "my sexual and relationship profile." In a culture of ubiquitous sexualization on platforms such as Instagram—often completely removed from lived sexual activity and pleasure—teenage girls present themselves as disturbing types of strangely displaced "sexuality" by conforming to the standard templates of clichéd "trout-pout" porn-star poses in branded sexy clothes.

In this over-saturated and incredibly noisy world, where every minute and every aspect of our lives are open to being "captured, optimized, or appropriated"⁸⁵ and selves and profiles must be endlessly "managed," the Song can be read as a powerful ally for creative calls to resistance through alternative modes of engagement and different ways of making time, place, community, and intimacy/touch. Jenny Odell's proposals for "surviving usefulness" and finding better lifescapes and landscapes than the "streamlining and networking of our entire lived experience"⁸⁶ read like a timely and uncannily close political allegorization of the Song. Calling attention to the sensations and pleasures of "inhabiting a reality interwoven by myriad bodily sensitivities besides my own—[with] the very boundaries of my own body overcome by the smell of jasmine and just ripening blackberry,"⁸⁷ Odell advocates strategies such as cultivating bioregional intimacies with the local spaces that nurture and sustain us, developing "a more-than-human-community" and turning our

84 Jenny Odell 2019, *How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn/London: Melville House), xii.

85 Jenny Odell 2019, x.

86 Jenny Odell 2019, ix.

87 Jenny Odell 2019, 29.

attention to the “local, carnal and poetic.”⁸⁸ The call to cut out the middle noise and re-connect intimately with the local environment is already charted in the open portals of the Song.

In contrast to Luther’s attempt to make the Song *work* as a typology of government, the Song now becomes political by dramatizing resistance to the “soul at work” and the translation of oneself into the “mythology of productivity.”⁸⁹ It models a form of rest which involves immense effort in order to actively and creatively resist the “uninterrupted noise ... a cognitive space overcharged with nervous incentives to act.”⁹⁰ The Song is a breath of fresh air: air that is not yet buzzing with voices and imperatives coming in on so many frequencies, air that is not yet thick with law, invasive commercial social media, and ways of signifying productively with the self, including the sexual self. Personally, I am deeply *moved* by this vision of the Song. The idea of taking a break to the Costa del Song of Songs has become far more than a joke in my Bible and feminism class, and far more than an allegory of a holiday, a moment in the paradise garden, to refresh us and amplify our capacities, ready for a return to work.

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88 Jenny Odell 2019, xii.

89 Jenny Odell 2019, xvi.

90 Franco “Bifo” Berardi 2009, .

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Thinking with Pink

Affective and Sensate Readings of Marc Chagall's Song of Songs

Fiona C. Black

It is color that immediately grasps viewers on their first glimpse of Chagall's 5-part series, *Cantique des Cantiques* (1958–65). A riot of it. And it is most unquestionably and startlingly *pink*. Located in a purpose-built room at the rear of the Musée National Marc Chagall in Nice, the series makes the Song of Songs public in a unique way. To be sure, bright, exuberant color is not unexpected in Chagall's work, nor is the multitude of familiar symbols—the circus, a rooster, a clock, flowers. In this instance, however, the *Cantique* series offers an intertextual vision of a biblical text that is at once uniform and unformed. It is an assemblage of rich, sensate textures of the Song, which is written over with bodily forms and washed in a gradation of rosy, vibrant tones. Pink, therefore, becomes not an incidental or secondary part of the viewer's reception of these texts, but an initial and arresting component of it.

Not unexpectedly, viewers have strong impressions on seeing these striking works: they are deeply moved by them. The plethora of pink invites the senses to take charge. Does it prompt the nose to discern the floral, or recall its scent? Do Chagall's inflections of the village prompt auditory cues (bells ringing, roosters crowing), or reminders of experiences or similar symbols in other works? Is it going too far to suggest that, perhaps, these blushing canvases might *over-saturate* viewers' senses and nauseate or manufacture loathing, conjuring excesses of flesh or an evening spent with Pepto Bismol? Or are these erotic sensations that the viewer experiences, with the paintings' suggestive curves and fleshy hues? Indeed, might it be love we think of when we wander into the room specially set aside for these five paintings, adorned with the dedication "A Vava, ma femme, ma joie, mon allègresse" ("To Vava, my wife, my joy, my jubilation").¹ A number of viewers have attempted to interpret this rare concentration of Song representations,² but the paintings resist commentary because they are repetitive, cycling through a number of familiar images

¹ Viewers in the know may well be thinking of love and its complications, seeing this dedication *in situ* and being aware of the paintings' original dedication to his first wife Bella, deceased by the time of the dedication to Vava.

² See notably J. Cheryl Exum 2019 and Daphna Rix 1979.

from Chagall's oeuvre, and do not seem to follow a particular trajectory (or tell an immediately obvious "story").³

In the context of a volume on the Song of Songs and its publics, this paper pursues Chagall's pictorial formulation of the Song and the impact on its viewers, in particular on *their sensibilities*. I venture beyond what has by now become a familiar model of studying art in biblical reception history—an examination of painting-as-biblical-interpretation. That is to say, my project is less interested in Chagall's retelling of the Song—thus avoiding the problem of assuming and privileging an *ur-text*—and less still about how the Song has influenced Chagall's versions. Instead, the interpretive thread I seek to follow here is how the Bible might function as a kind of public/political cipher when it is *pinked* and packaged in a gallery setting. I take this opportunity to think about how this display of biblical subject matter *organizes* or *moves* its public, how indeed the Bible might be understood as participating in the marshalling of viewers and their senses and feelings. To do this work, this paper proposes to *think with pink*, which is arguably an odd way of framing a hermeneutical strategy. To think with pink is an attempt to upend the interpretive process, to put senses, feeling and affect first by engaging with the sense-laden, visual cues that color initially prompts.

Such an endeavor may not be entirely straightforward. The viewer's experiences of art—and art's connection with the senses—are surely individual matters, particular to the subject who is engaging with them; they might even be considered somewhat private. And yet, art and viewer sensibilities are historically contextualized and culturally connoted. They are public, in other words. Chagall himself was very aware of such matters. He spoke of the ability of people and places to influence art. Sometimes—if such influences are traumatic and rupturing as they were during the Holocaust—they might destabilize the artist's vision and practice.⁴ On the other hand, Chagall also showed himself aware of the power of art to transform, and this was particularly his understanding when that art was mediating the themes and stories of the Bible. His hope for the new museum was that:

Perhaps the young and not-so-young will come to this House in search of an ideal of brotherhood and love such as my colors and lines have dreamed it. Perhaps they will also speak the words of this love which

3 This same pattern is true of the Song of Songs itself. See the discussion in Fiona C. Black 2009 (ch. 4) and J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 42–45.

4 Marc Chagall 2003, 66.

I feel for everyone. Perhaps there will be no more enemies, and like a mother bringing a child into the world in love and pain, the young and the not-so-young will build a world of love with new coloring. And everyone, regardless of their religion, will be able to come here and speak for this dream, far from evil and confusion.⁵

1 The Paintings

The presence of the paintings in the museum is tied up with the creation of the museum itself. In 1970, the French government began construction on this space in Nice to house the biblical works that Chagall had donated to the state several years prior (1966). The Musée du Message Biblique Marc Chagall opened in 1973, and as its name implies, its core focus was Chagall's work on biblical themes and stories. Its collection was augmented (and thematically expanded) at the time of Chagall's death by the donation of some 300 works in lieu of inheritance tax. This ambitious project was to be the first time a museum was built to honor a living artist in France.

The majority of the museum space is taken up by twelve large biblical works, encompassing such subjects as Moses receiving the law and the *Akedah*. At the rear of the museum, there is a unique, airy space dedicated to the *Cantique* series, which was painted between 1958 and 1964. Chagall originally planned the biblical series for the Chapelle du Calvaire in his home town, Vence.⁶ He was excited by the commission, likening it to Matisse's own project in the Chapelle du Rosaire, also in Vence.⁷ There is some speculation as to why the paintings were never placed there, but the official record retains the explanation that it was feared that the physical envelope of the building would eventually damage the works through exposure to humidity and mold.⁸ It seemed, too, that the museum offered something on a broader scale for Chagall—not merely physically, but ideologically. The initial donation of the

5 Marc Chagall 2003, 173.

6 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 10.

7 Sidney Alexander 1978, 410, 464.

8 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 10.

biblical works, according to the Museum's website, emerged from Chagall's wish: "*Je voudrais aussi qu'en ce lieu on expose des œuvres d'art et des documents de haute spiritualité de tous les peuples, qu'on entende leur musique et leur poésie guidée par le cœur.*"⁹

The *Cantiques*' spatial positioning is an integral part of its presence and reception. My own journey to the museum was made in order to see these pieces in particular, and so my search for them as I wended my way through the various rooms—accompanied by my growing anticipation—was naturally part of the experience. However, located as they are at the rear of the complex, even for non-*cantophiles*, one does have the sense that the works' positioning might reflect something important. It seems as though they provide an unusual addendum or afterthought in the museum—that they are something that has to be found, or upon which one might unintentionally happen, on the way to something or somewhere else. In this manner, they function as an out-of-the-way and unexpected surprise that confronts viewers as they wander through. In my reading, I make something of this spatial positioning. Where I would not want to call the Song itself an afterthought in the biblical canon, its late adoption and its uniqueness in both its subject matter and its omission of typical canonical elements such as the deity and the covenant render it marginal in its own way. It seems to me that there is something important in this shared positioning (both spatial and ideological) in book and paintings, especially since they are echoed in the artist's own life and relation to his times and context. What movement is required of the reader/viewer in order to access them?

As with the Song itself, these paintings present a puzzle that must be negotiated. They invite one to discover and apply a hermeneutical key, but so many factors about them seem to resist. In comparing a text replete with images from the natural world and the city (to name but two contexts), viewers find similar kinds of symbols here in the paintings. The equivalences are not direct, however: instead of gazelles, pomegranates or lilies, we find roosters, clocks and cities. There is another correspondence with the biblical Song too. The book resists any narrative interpellation, though readers have long attempted to make sense of it by supplying a consistent story, especially one that might match their cultural sensibilities. The impulse with the paintings is also to try to determine if they show a progression or tell a story. In this case, the works

9 "I would also like this place to exhibit works of art and documents of high spirituality from all peoples, to hear their music and poetry guided by the heart." <https://musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/chagall/en/node/471>, accessed July 1, 2020.

frustrate connections between symbols and “real life.” The result is that, just as with the Song, the paintings organize a certain confusion in the viewer.

This confusion is augmented by the matter of the placement of the paintings in the room. Each piece is labeled numerically; however, the dates assigned do not reflect the order in which they were worked (probably all concurrently), but rather their order of completion.¹⁰ They are placed according to values that were never explained by the artist. Biblical verses are posted above each painting. These were supplied not by the artist, but by a curator who placed them in an exhibit (2011) alongside work on the Song by another painter, František Kupka. (And they have remained, even after the end of the original exhibit.)¹¹ So, the verses that are used functionally to “title” each piece, may or may not explicate the works. The viewer (especially one who knows the Song well) might immediately try to make correspondences with the text, with or without the appended verses. The viewer who does not know the texts may be given an interpretive key that the artist did not intend. And then there is the matter of the museum’s connection of the Song in its printed materials with that other age-old purported “love story,” that of David and Bathsheba.¹² Again, any prospective viewer might also try to lay that story alongside the paintings, which would place the Song in a bizarre space, indeed.

Thus, even upon entering the room, one is confronted with basic interpretive issues such as: In what order should these pieces be viewed? Numerical? Contextual? Should they be read as depictions of the Song texts—or other biblical material? Which? Since the paintings obviously relate to each other in color, style and symbolism, should one read them comparatively? Is there a development, a story to be discerned? Surely, too, the movement of the viewer implicates their reading—the entrance to the room directs the viewer to the leftmost piece, and unless intentionally deciding otherwise, the typical habit of visitors would be to proceed to the right.¹³ These indecisions and questions need not cause alarm, and one should not lament the lack of prescription from the artist or curators on how to view the paintings. Perhaps it is preferable to sit with the mystery or inscrutability of the pieces. It is, however, interesting that the numerous attempts to organize the paintings, both *in situ* and in scholarly literature serve as remnants of viewings that both maker and viewers have left

10 The positioning of the pieces was described to me in this way by Cédric Scherer, Médiateur Culturel du Musée Marc Chagall (private conversation, July, 2013). Any errors in reflecting this conversation are mine.

11 Cédric Scherer, Médiateur Culturel du Musée Marc Chagall (private conversation, July, 2013). Any errors in reflecting this conversation are mine.

12 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 73.

13 Kali Tzortzi 2014, 329.

for subsequent visitors. Such traces of interpretive keys for the paintings may still exert influence over subsequent visitors.

2 Sensing Our Way Through

Though it may not be the typical practice in biblical reception history/criticism, especially of artistic works, such questions might legitimately be pushed to the background in favor of exploring feeling as an avenue for engagement instead. To be clear, my proposal is not to recognize, then *rationalize*, the sensate or felt response, thereby to subject it to analysis and use as a new hermeneutical key that would offer a definitive interpretation of the paintings or the Song. Instead, it is to *feel my way* through the works and to let that itself be the journey, so that we might consider how the artist/Song might be moving viewers in a particular *felt* direction.¹⁴ This work brings us firmly into the realm of the physical and the corporeal: to affect. Affect often indicates the emotional—but not in the typically delineated, interior and personal understanding. Instead, it seeks to explore emotion's pre-cognitive connections, which are manifested in relational or socio-political spheres.¹⁵ In other words, the feeling in a room, the ineffable quality of attraction, the unspoken but perceptible angst of a person ... these are all indications of affect. They are not only subjectively felt, but are filtered through cultural, historical and social contexts. "Indeed," as Maia Kotrosits succinctly explains, "in affect theory, how one feels is an index of social forces and structures, a qualitative measure of the impingement of those forces and structures on individual and collective bodies."¹⁶

There are also the senses, which operate as a kind of gateway to or facilitators of affect, creating a kind of corporeal toolbox for feeling. The immediate response to the paintings is visual: I led with pink for a reason. Indeed, as David Howes and Constance Classen point out, it is the visual which has often taken precedence in gallery experiences (arguably logically), often to the detriment of other senses.¹⁷ The plethora of symbols, the use of space, and the

14 Many years ago (Fiona C. Black, 1999), I was trying to think about this felt response from another angle, following Roland Barthes and the idea of the eroticism of the text. Where that contribution metaphorized the Song as lover, here it is useful to think about the feelings that the Song and its afterlives might produce.

15 See Maia Kotrosits 2016 and Fiona C. Black and Jennifer Koosed 2019 for introductions to and examples of this approach in biblical studies. See also Brian L. Ott (2017) for a concise and general introduction to the field of affect theory.

16 Maia Kotrosits 2014, 477.

17 David Howes and Constance Classen 2014, 18.

various disorientations of the pieces, however, also locate the viewer somatically in the midst of them in ways that allow us to notice how interaction with the *Cantiques* series extends beyond the visual. The paintings require of their viewers that they connect with their own sensate experience, not finally to determine the paintings' meaning, but to determine their own. The paintings force the viewer to consider how the senses form connections or make bonds in their own lives as much as in those depicted in the canvases. With their physical bodies, viewers engage in a range of ways: haptically, auditorially, gustatorially and olfactorially. We have in play, too, a cultural and intellectual memory of the senses, a way of feeling with the body, which we bring to bear on our experience in the little room at the back of the museum. Without exhaustively tracing each bodily sense in each painting, it is useful to explore a few instances of such meetings of the senses with the works. The aim is not to offer a singular interpretation, but to ruminate over the sense-excess that the paintings open up.



FIGURE 12.1 *Cantique de Cantiques I* (1960)
MUSÉE NATIONAL MARC CHAGALL, NICE

2.1 *The Floating Couple: Cantique de Cantiques I (1960)*

Chagall's world is often airborne.¹⁸ Figures assume haphazard positions in relation to each other; they are seated, lying, suspended mid-air on their side, walking; oddly configured in half embrace. Is it a garden? Are we being drawn in to wander through, to visit the figures at each site? (What is in bloom? The gardener in me wants to know.) The composition is disorienting and dizzying; it prompts us to ponder which is right-side up. This world spins and we spin with it; proprioception becomes a lifeline.

The overwhelming experience beyond the visual is haptic. In airspace, I feel the air rushing in my ears, feel it pricking my skin, raising its hairs and tearing at the corner of my eyes. The tears sting. My brain seeks to identify an accompanying feeling. I feel buffeted about. Spherical shapes invite the hand to caress them; leaves promise a feathery retort. The pink mottling and curvature are fleshy. What would they feel like on the tongue? Are the darker parts softer? Hotter? (Biblical reception is getting quite steamy.)

A whetted V-shape dominates the center of the image, threatening with its sharpness (directed at the lover's head) and slicing through any softness I might find elsewhere. No, it is not phallic. Instead, I am reminded of a knife; I think of surgery, the slicing and tugging of the curves and folds of the flesh at the center of the work. Why does this piece trouble me so? I can't see it as bucolic, as Exum does.¹⁹ I feel squeamish; I begin to panic. Should I touch the pinkness? Smooth it? Squish it beneath my fingers? Would it bleed?

The eye rests on the white figure ("not realistic enough to hold a voyeuristic gaze," Exum 2019, 160). I cannot stop coming back to it, staring. I wonder, does her hair smell like balsam? Like the scrub or the woods? Does he smell it? Is he feeling the dove fluttering at his nape? Does it scratch with its claws, coo in his ear? I taste her skin; it is mineral and powdery, like chalk. Would the texture of the paint come away dusty on my fingertips if I stroked it? What sort of an embrace is this?

2.2 *The Wedding Day and the Night After: Cantique de Cantiques III (1960)*

We are back in airspace, but this time buffeted by the sights and sounds of the city. I cannot help but notice an impressive couple, walking on stilts as if they were at the Big Top, making their way across the canvas. They tower over the city, which seems to be in their midst. Right side up and upside down, I am

18 As Benjamin Harshav observes, he eventually took his exaltation of love to the skies after marriage (2006, 113).

19 J. Cheryl Exum 2019, 160.



FIGURE 12.2 *Canticum de Canticis III* (1960)
MUSÉE NATIONAL MARC CHAGALL, NICE

dizzy with it. Chagall has placed his bride and groom in a circus-like setting: the picture is joyful and ludic, both. Two round spheres and a larger semi-circle at the bottom make a bombastic face in the background. The city's buildings, two layers that mirror each other, are its pursed mouth.

Mine is the nose that is missing on this painted face. The rosy and red hues smell warm and humid, like rain. The green and blue are a cool counterpoint. They are air from the countryside that lingers on the picture's margins, beating back the city's smells—the oven, the forge, the river, the sewer. And my ears are here too: this painting deafens. Trumpets blare from the lips of an angel and an acrobat; yellow calls from the candlestick and the light that ricochets off surfaces. Onlookers murmur; others cry out. The lovers whisper to each other, both as they marry and as they lie together after their celebration.

2.3 *Is That What I Think It Is? Canticum de Canticis II* (1957)

Respectfully, let us observe the Shulammitte as she reclines on a bed of flowers (or is it in a tree?), arm above her head, inviting those in the room to gaze at her.²⁰ Her bed is of the softest nature, and everything seems intent on her

20 J. Cheryl Exum 2019, 161.



FIGURE 12.3 *Cantique de Cantiques II* (1957)
MUSÉE NATIONAL MARC CHAGALL, NICE

comfort: bodies, the city and even the light of the moon are in soft focus, swaying, brushing, gently inclined so as to cradle her as she rests. It is blissful. We are welcomed into this space, invited perhaps to lie there too, to feel the softness of her skin, smelling the heady scent of the flowers on which she lies. Are we to embody the persona of her lover (whose head appears subtly buried in the bedding)?

But wait: This central figure seems strange. Is it a perversion to notice the vulvic shape of the bed of roses on which the woman is ensconced? I am certain I am not the only one to think this. All the more interesting, then, that of all the paintings that invite touch, this one seems to beckon the visitor the most. Do you want to run your fingers through the roses, to stroke the body at the center as it is laid out for you? After all, isn't the Shulammitte touching herself? Touch seems, in fact, the order of the day for this picture. Hands free float in the bottom of the picture; David plucks the strings of the lyre up above.

But something else touches too. It is the eventual absence of all senses, for death is the sobering undertext for those who look closely, amidst this coital reverie. The Tree of Life is there, floating upside down, in reference to the reclining figure, Bella—who is now gone from the world.²¹ Has she indeed “fallen asleep”? Or is the seated figure actually Valentina, who has taken Bella’s place?²² Is David winged because he is no more? After all, the Solomonic/Davidic throne is present, but empty. Isolated body parts (a head, a hand) are suggestive of dislocation, too. Such images (compare the upside-down wandering Jew in *Cantique* III) suggest that for the more symbolically sensitive viewer, there are deeper or darker places that the painting goes with imagery and the senses.

But am I perhaps too much “in my head”? Do you think it a perversion to mention death in what we must be expected to think of as a jubilant scene? The problem with the senses is that they offer all kinds of permutations, and many of them may not be welcomed by the artist, or other viewers.

3 Feeling, Moving, Meaning-Making

By way of the above brief exploration, it is obvious that actual handling, sniffing or licking the works in question need not transpire for a fuller sense engagement with them.²³ Rather, Chagall’s *Cantique* series opens the possibility of an engagement where viewers move beyond the visual and consider their bodily interactions more fully. Perhaps a useful way to put it would be that Chagall’s work might prompt a practice of embodied or sensate visiting—acknowledging, of course, that *looking* is how gallery visitors would likely first and most consciously interact with the paintings. To notice and respond to the auditory, haptic, or gustatory sense images is to invoke those senses in oneself and to connect purposefully with a sensate history, along with the experiential and commemorative apparatus that comes with it.

I venture that these sense-laden responses promote movement, but it is not only a literal moving to which I refer. To be sure, there is navigation around the space and around other viewers in the museum. There might also be the flushing in excitement, the intake of breath on seeing them for the first time larger than life (I had such a reaction), or the turning to one’s companion in

21 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 78.

22 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 78.

23 Compare Constance Classen 2017, who does argue for a more literal engagement with the “other” senses in galleries.

exclamation. These somatic and kinetic responses may be in evidence, but *movement* also signifies something else. On seeing the pieces, might not visitors be moved emotionally, might they not notice that something is happening to them as they encounter the works? Or, might they remark to themselves, “these paintings move me”? Such a reaction indicates movement of another type, one that is feeling-oriented or affective. Put differently, the pieces make an impression, which is literally that: they *press* on the visitor, leaving an indelible “mark” or trace,²⁴ and, so pressed, the visitor responds, motion answering motion. This mark is the effect of the sense-explosion that they experience, along with the impact of the paintings’ objects viewed in their specific permutations, combinations, and associations. Coming hard on their heels, there are the stories of those objects and the multiple histories that they indicate, for those for whom the symbols first resonated, and for Chagall, who uses them to tell stories of a nation and a world. There is a saturation here: the paintings are an intertextual cacophony. There is almost too much “noise” to navigate, and the endless referentiality confounds. And yet the pieces are persistent: they cause the visitor to consider and consider again.

The distinction should be made between incomprehensibility and what might be best described as multi-comprehensibility. Chagall’s work encourages the latter and refuses to be static, often disorienting the viewer. To be sure, movement is evident in the dynamism of the contents in the works, but opportunities for *impression*, for being moved, are many and varied too. Mieke Bal’s experientially driven reflection on a series of paintings by Edvard Munch is useful in thinking through movement in the multi-valent way that I have been describing. Bal uses movement (*kinein*) as a complex thread of analysis to indicate three levels of engagement with the works by viewers. Her interest is in the cinematic qualities of several pieces, pointing out how they appear to show motion, but at the same time draw viewers in, implicating their own movements as they twist and turn, manipulating the visual plain so that they might see clearly.²⁵ As a result, she points to the perceptions of viewers and the fact that they navigate between present and past sensations. Her response to seeing the shoe—then its owner’s full figure—in Munch’s *Workers on their Way Home* (1913–14), for example, is instructive. She recalls how it “almost hit” her; now, she can no longer unsee it;²⁶ she “cannot take it lightly” and appears to be haunted by it. This type of response engenders a movement between past

24 Sara Ahmed 2015, 6.

25 Mieke Bal is not referring to the technological or artistic form of cinema, but directs us towards the Greek origins of the word (*kinein*), indicating movement as well as the metaphorical idea that Munch’s paintings “animat[e] a situation of movement and transformation” (2017, 33).

26 Mieke Bal 2017, 34.

and present sensations and locates sensation itself as a variable, historically connoted phenomenon. Finally, through both of these movements, she sees a third type, which is affective. Having been moved, the viewer is propelled on to social or political action.²⁷

If I were to consider Chagall's *Cantique* series in this light, I might draw attention to the fluid nature of the works, referencing the dynamism of the figures, how they move within their own canvases and appear to move to others. As we saw, curved lines, spatial changes and color gradations serve to augment this impression. And it is true that the paintings require something of their audience: we must move our bodies to trace their dynamics; we perceive that an adjustment on our part means a shift in theirs. Moreover, when we open our senses to the possibilities the paintings prompt, our bodies respond, "feeling" along with the characters we visit in the museum. But it is the next two types of movement that Bal elaborates which interest me most—and here I am adjusting her analysis a little. (How) Do the paintings in fact *move* viewers? Do they prompt an emotional response? And do they subsequently move viewers to some other action or event? To bring it back to the Song of Songs, what does the public elaboration of this biblical text in a gallery setting *do*, and what might its impact be, beyond the gallery walls?

Initially, it is a highly suggestive setting in which viewers find themselves, coming upon this "chamber of love" after navigating the museum's rooms and passageways. When viewers enter the room, they are arrested, confronted with a space that appears to be both ebullient and solemn at the same time, co-presenting, as Exum notes, both "an overt and delicate celebration of sexual love."²⁸ The room is energetic, riotous in color, and yet strange as well. It is a tribute (to Vava and to their love), with a plaque proudly celebrating the pieces' dedication. To complicate things, it is clearly *also* a tribute to Bella, Chagall's first wife, who appears as many of the bride figures. Further, of course, it is the love story of the Shulammitte and her beloved, figured and reconfigured—and if the museum literature is able to influence us, maybe even that of Bathsheba and David.²⁹ So, how could one not drink in and be carried away by the atmosphere in this room? Would visitors have any choice but to ponder love, romance and sex, and think of/feel the flesh, especially as it is loudly proclaimed from wall to wall? And could they ever ponder it without the innumerable factors that come with the complications of being an embodied, gendered, sexual, and *otherways* contextualized person?

²⁷ Mieke Bal 2017, 33.

²⁸ J. Cheryl Exum 2019, 159.

²⁹ Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 73.

At this point, we might recall Chagall's wish for the pieces he offered to France that would comprise the museum's main collection: "*Je voudrais aussi qu'en ce lieu on expose des œuvres d'art et des documents de haute spiritualité de tous les peuples, qu'on entende leur musique et leur poésie guidée par le cœur.*" To paraphrase, his desire was that the museum would exhibit works of art and texts that are representative of the high spirituality of all people. Further he hoped that people might hear the music and poetry of these works, *guided by the heart*. Chagall's vision of art and the Bible, both, was an elevated one. All art for him was religious in a way. He painted in colors of hope and love, and in that love, he perceived that one finds the logic of society and the essence of all religions. He thought, also, that perfection in art and in life issues from the Bible.³⁰ He therefore saw a clear role for the "heart" in the appreciation of the essential message of the Bible, both in its ability to reflect and to project love. People respond—they are moved—not out of an intellectual obligation or determination, but from the heart. Was he perhaps suggesting that the biblical text encourages a response *from feeling*? From love? Such an impression would certainly match his own attestation: "Only love interests me, and I am only in contact with things that revolve around love."

It is tempting then to ask: Can the heart prompt its own reaction? This well-known metaphorical expression "from the heart" usually describes a response that is genuine, or perhaps revelatory of love. It is usually understood as just that: a metaphor. If this is so, then Chagall's aspirations are attributable to the artist operating in his familiar and somewhat baroque manner as poet.³¹ The Song's own language interjects at this moment in the conversation, though, and offers an elaboration that is impossible to ignore: We recall that, on hearing her lover at the door, the Shulammite says, roughly, "my insides moved for him," (5:4).³² At this moment, the body answers the lover's action. The Shulammite *feels* it (something moves [in] her) and this prompts further

30 Jean-Michel Foray and Françoise Rossini-Paquet 2000, 10.

31 See the important discussion in Benjamin Harshav 2006 about Chagall as the poet-artist, with his unique discourse in his works.

32 My (inelegant) translation. Though not literally accurate, many of the English Bible translations refer to the heart or feelings: NIV "my heart pounded for him"; NASB "my feelings were stirred for him"; RSV "my heart was thrilled within me"; NRSV "my inmost being yearned for him." Hebrew *me'ayim* is usually translated as the generic "inward parts" such as the "intestines, bowels, [or] guts," as Pope elaborates (1977, 519), which ubiquitously are the seat of feelings or emotional responses. J. Cheryl Exum translates literally as "my insides were stirred because of him," but prefers "my body was thrilled" (2005, 183, 85), noting that *me'ayim* and the corresponding verb *hnh* indicate internal arousal and/or orgasm (2005, 195)—this captures the blending of feeling *and* physical response well. Both the poet/Shulammite and Chagall seem aware that the physical body stimulates

movement, to the door, then the outside of the house, on to the encounter with the watchmen, and then to the resulting engagement with the daughters of Jerusalem and her lover. Chagall's "from the heart," then, indicates more than a single, vague reaction to a stimulus, but recalls the orientation of the Shulammite's body, that it registers feeling and moves—emotionally, and physically as well. One wonders if Chagall was thinking about such a response in his wish for the future museum. He appears to have hoped for an engagement with a history of spiritual practice, and even a greater understanding of sensuousness. But was he also not perceiving that the dynamism of his works, and even their physical placement, would ignite the senses, get the body moving? Was he also not hoping (thinking with Bal) to *start a movement* towards brotherhood and mutual understanding; in sum, a movement from the heart that results in action?³³

Art surely comprises more than its maker's intention for it, but Chagall's movement from the heart seems a good place to begin our thoughts along these lines. What Chagall prompts might fittingly be labeled "love," though he himself notes the limitations of the word.³⁴ On first blush, love indicates the romantic feelings and ideals that the museum's "room of love" suggests and in which visitors may find themselves caught up. They may be impacted by Chagall's tribute on the wall as they enter the room: all his works bear witness to his own loves. They may be moved by the subject matter of the paintings, as well. For instance, they may say "I *love* Chagall's paintings," or "this reminds me of my love," or even "I fall *in love* [with so and so] when I see these pieces!" I suspect that there is something else, though: visitors are moved in other ways as well. These romantic notions, in fact, model a deeper relation.

Indeed, the museum is "where people go to feel."³⁵ As various commentators have shown, in the museum there is already an affective economy of love that is underway in the work of the curator, artist, and the visitor. For instance, Helena Reckitt explores the uncredited and unspoken labor of curators, whose love for their subjects of curation and for their job often engenders unpaid work that is undertaken as a duty of care and out of respect for the general public's love for art in general.³⁶ Alexis Boylan investigates how this love for

feeling, and movement. We might mention the Shulammite's *actual* heart too, which also stirs emotion and prompts movement: Song 3:11, 5:2 and 8:6.

33 It is useful to remember Chagall's hopes for the museum, quoted above: "Perhaps ... [they] will come to this House in search of an ideal of brotherhood and love ... and build a world of love with new coloring" (Marc Chagall 2003, 173).

34 Marc Chagall 2003, 135.

35 Laurajane Smith 2014, 125.

36 Helena Reckitt 2016.

art can sometimes be used by museums to select works, engage the general public, and eventually fundraise. She gestures towards the order of something like “donate if you love art”—but it is of course more sophisticated than that;³⁷ we visit and support museums because of existing feelings for them and their contents (is it “love”?).³⁸ We are, in other words, primed as museum visitors to be already in this affective space. When combined with the opportunity to interact with the works whose subject is love, and when armed with the knowledge of the artist as a proponent of love, it seems that one cannot avoid this affect that *sticks* to the visitor.³⁹ This, to put it another way, seems to be a way of drawing viewers together in a common ideal.

To write of the “stickiness” of some emotions, as I have just done, is to evoke the work of Sara Ahmed, which elaborates the common ideal in the following way. She understands love as a way of bonding with others in connection with an ideal, which in turn takes shape as an effect of such bonding.⁴⁰ Her exploration of this affect “consider[s] how the pull of love towards an other, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object.”⁴¹ Love’s success in this model depends on the object of love failing to be attainable, or the love failing to be returned. Her description is strikingly true of the Song of Songs⁴²—and of Chagall’s own personal narrative as well:

Indeed, the impossibility that love can reach its object may also be what makes love powerful as a narrative. At one level, love comes into being as a form of reciprocity; the lover wants to be loved back, wants their love returned. At another, love survives the absence of reciprocity in the sense that the pain of not being loved in return—if the emotion stays with the object to which it has been directed—confirms the negation that would

37 Alexis Boylan 2015.

38 It does not stop there, either, as Hilary Geoghegan and Alison Hess illustrate (2015): the forgotten objects in museum storerooms also benefit from “object-love” and become desired again and thus are brought back into the collection.

39 Often quoted, Sara Ahmed refers to the stickiness of some emotions—things that slide off one body onto another, adhering, saturating them with affect, sticking them together. For example, see 2004a, 118–19; 2015, 11, 45, 191.

40 Sara Ahmed 2015, 124.

41 Sara Ahmed 2015, 124.

42 I think here of the lovers in the Song, who seem to spend a great deal of their time searching for their counterpart, who is absent. The book ends inconclusively: are they together or apart? It also recalls the behaviour of lovers of the Song, who, as I have shown (Fiona C. Black 1999; 2009), must also contend with the possibility that their love for the text is not returned.

follow from the loss of the object. Even though love is a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect (so if you do not love me back, I may love you more as the pain of that non loving is a sign of what it means not to have this love).⁴³

The pull towards an other, coupled with love's failure to be returned, is the mechanism at play in collective or national love as well. This, incidentally, happens to be the affect that is instrumental in the creation of national museums such as the Musée National Marc Chagall. Building on Freud's work on love as crucial to the formation of group identities, Ahmed agrees that a collective is formed when the subjects are united in their love for the nation. The nation, of course, does not return that love, but this only heightens the lovers' intensity and ardour. One loves the nation "out of hope and with nostalgia for how it could have been,"⁴⁴ and seeing the failure of return, continues the investment and projects the ideal onto the future. In this analysis, bodies are integral to realizing that ideal, which is not an abstract formulation, but is a "concrete effect of how some bodies have moved towards and away from other bodies, a movement that works to create boundaries and borders, and the 'approximation' of what we can now call a 'national character' (what the nation is *like*)."⁴⁵ National love also "requires an explanation for its failure" which comes in the identification of obstacles.⁴⁶ Ahmed's ideas are useful for thinking through not only the affective response of visitors to Chagall's works, but to the space itself in which they reside.

4 The Erotic Community and the Song

What, then, does Ahmed and her work mean for our paintings and the depiction of the Song in the public sphere? I want to investigate whether the *Cantique* series—if we are able to work with the lens that I have been proposing—might be seen to be functioning via affect to create a "collective" through its visitors. The Bible, in other words, organizes emotion and response when it is artistically rendered and publicly displayed (just as it might in other

43 Sara Ahmed 2015, 130.

44 Sara Ahmed 2015, 131.

45 Sara Ahmed 2015, 133.

46 In Sara Ahmed's study it is the presence of racialized others who get in the way of the perfected nation.

forms of reception). The sensory excesses engage us, giving us multiple entry points into this world, and once we are there, they seem to assist in our orientation towards feeling—love in this case. On one level, as we always seem to do with the Song, we interpolate ourselves into this world, thinking about our own loves and failures, our own romances, rejections, or maybe abuses (it does not always have to be a *rosy* picture that the *Cantiques* pieces evince).⁴⁷ We cannot help but see ourselves there, and the fact that Chagall has inserted his own personal relationships—his loves and losses—into the Song maps at least one way for us to see ourselves too. On another level, though, we unwittingly become lovers in a different and more complex sense. We are moved to feel, but in this case, feeling goes beyond simple romance or sexual attraction. We are brought together to seek or find ourselves in this room, immersed and overwhelmed at first in the onslaught of its pinkness; we find a camaraderie, a closeness. The paintings push on us and we respond, finding ourselves drawn into the worlds they are creating. Feeling therefore proceeds to create community, and it is through feeling that we are marshalled together to take part in a collective purpose.⁴⁸ Now, the question is: is that collective purpose what Chagall had hoped for, or are there other possibilities?

Where I could not easily argue that today the paintings prompt Chagall's hoped-for appreciation of a higher spirituality, I do think that they have consistently been able to nudge a response "from the heart," as he desired. I suggest that, because of their subject matter and their figuration, the works facilitate a community of eroticism, which encompasses the sexual, the relational and the motile. To be sure, the claim is not made here that the paintings and their setting manage to engender identical types and depth of feeling.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, they seem to open connection points with the physical and emotional body. Most obviously, the sense-rich world of the Song, which Chagall has well translated onto canvas, creates an erotic imperative for the museum visitor. "Feel with us!" it urges, offering the opportunity to push visually dominant gallery experience aside, allowing the more neglected senses to muscle their way in. Smell, taste, touch, and hearing: these are no strangers to the erotic, but they

47 See discussion in Fiona C. Black 1999 and 2009 for more on these readerly connections.

48 Note that this should not be taken to imply that we all interpret or feel *exactly the same thing* in the same way. Again, I am not trying to argue for a specific interpretation or meaning, but to suggest a commonality of felt experience.

49 Mieke Bal reminds us that sensuousness is "an ongoing transformation, hence an object of history" (2017, 32); its shifting nature is a matter of cultural/historical context.

are the neglected others in museum practice⁵⁰ and even in Song criticism.⁵¹ For an audience assembled in Nice in the presence of these pieces, there is a reminder that we are embodied—beyond our eyes—that the lovers promote an erotic practice that exceeds the cerebral or the (purely) genital. It is an eroticism that is intricately woven with the city, with nature, with the past, and with the particularities of people's lives. It prompts us to experience other parts of our world with this same relational, erotic lens.

How, then, to reconcile this invitation to sensory excess and the relational with the rather obvious reproduction in the works of what is ostensibly a normative sexuality? By this, I do not mean simply that the paintings are heteronormative—though this is certainly in evidence. More, I think that on the first viewing and to the sense-*unaware* visitor they depict a fairly demure, non-kinky, non-queer (in all its many meanings) sexuality. This is the eroticism of a world of a traditional bridal couple. There is little that is racy, “blue” (definitely not blue) or “perverted” here, nothing of the “thwacking or thumping,” to reference Rhiannon Graybill's essay in chapter 2 of this volume. I make this observation not because Chagall has avoided the explicit or because it is impossible to “read for” the thwacking, but because there is an overall feeling of restrained connection here—at least on the surface—and not the intensity that I take to be so pervasive in the Song text.⁵² To be sure, it seems that the most erotic piece of all is the painting that features the Shulammitte alone in her own world of self pleasure (*Cantique des Cantiques* II [1957]). It is almost as if Chagall prefers to imagine these lovers (and their thwacking), but cannot bring himself to represent that imagined world more fully. Could one suggest, therefore, that this performance might convey a message of *appropriate* sexuality to an audience, directing them to orient themselves in the same way? We are not so much invited into this space to *participate* as we might be invited to respect it, to venerate it as having some kind of higher purpose. Ironically, there is a kind of “pinkwashing” here, but it is not a queering of the Song's sex; instead, pink casts a sexual monochrome. Visitors are, perhaps, positioned in a state of awe, called to pay respects at this altar of *The Sex of the Bible*. Or, to again

50 See discussion in David Howes and Constance Classen 2014, 18–21; Hilary Geoghegan and Alison Hess 2015, 448–9.

51 Even my own prior work on the imagery, proposed a different way of thinking about it and the Song's fuller message, was vision-centric (2009).

52 One might compare the intensity and eroticism of the 1001 Arabian Nights illustrations (1948), which seem unabashed in their exploration of sexual positions, and facial expressions that are suggestive of sexual pleasure. Even some of Chagall's other paintings of lovers (e.g., *Lovers in Black*, 1910?) manage to convey an intensity that I do not find here in the *Cantiques* series.

refer to Chagall's hopes for the museum, to recognize and venerate a higher spiritual plane.

Further to this, and perhaps because of it, one might not be surprised to see the context here as familial, that is, the the sort of world (the village, the marriage, the couple) that eventually will include reproduction, family, and lineage. Though not antithetical to these ideas (mentioning family members and groupings, even death), the *Song* certainly does not subjugate the events and sexual experiences of the couple to this more traditional picture. Quite the opposite: it seems entirely focused on the couple and their experiences in the here and now, quite removed from society's constraints. Chagall's broad inclusion of a spectrum of society (the old, the young), though, along with the history of Judaism (the patriarchs, the covenant), and the particularities of a single community, Vitebsk, lend themselves to this generational view. And, of course, marriage is front and center here (Chagall's, the biblical couple's). These factors lead to speculation that, while sexual mores may be changing in the West in the late 1950s and beyond, the *Cantiques* series seems content with fostering the sort of erotic community that tempers society's sexual excesses, that hearkens back to heteronormative, monogamous ideals.⁵³ Chagall's Song-marriage seems to manifest an appropriate order, what we might infer he deems to be right and good. It mirrors his own long-term relationships. It pays a dutiful respect for the loved wife who has been lost. There is no hint of anything beyond it. This is, in short, an eroticism meant to encapsulate not private proclivities, but a very proper and public sort of sex.

What does it mean to engage in an erotic community that is on the one hand open to the excessive, synaesthetic and multi-relational embodiment I describe, and on the other, delimited in such a way by the artist's apparent direction as to sanction monogamy, fulfilled-but-restrained desire, and the confines of a specific public? I find the *Song* in a curious space here, because it naturally is fluid enough⁵⁴ to exceed these bounds and in many ways fits uncomfortably in the erotic ideal I have been describing. On the other hand, it is exactly that fluidity which seems to make the *Song* able to be purposed in a number of different directions, which could easily include that restrained framing which seems so present in these works of Chagall. Moreover, it would

53 Who constitutes such a society is of course the question. There are the matters of class, of culture/a cultural elite and the nature of the museum-goer, past and present, that need to be raised here as well. As I indicated above, museum- or gallery-goers may well be attuned to the affect of the paintings, and one suspects that those who are ready to love Chagall (love art/love the gallery) are those who are in a position to do so, in terms of education, access and leisure. See more below.

54 Fiona C. Black, 1999, 2009.

seem that the *Cantiques* series' own context in the Musée exerts influence in this discussion as well.

5 An Erotic Nationalism?

In light of the gallery setting, could the erotic community, therefore, also be working in concert with a grander scheme? At the same time as they bear witness to this story of love, visitors also are made complicit in the use of a familiar trope. Readily available in most of the images, as we have seen, the female body is laid out for the viewer, inviting the erotic gaze.⁵⁵ This predominant, sexualized female form in the paintings shows the feminized city as a dominant figure⁵⁶ and creates a complex relation of female sexual identity and national culture. Such a story is an old one for the conceptual museum indeed, that nations might be self-actualized and want to display what they believe they *possess*, along with whom they include and whom they exclude at their borders. Indeed, where are the lines between the female body and the foreign body? It seems that women's and outsiders' bodies do the work of the state to educate its citizens (more on this below) but are not fully brought into the body politic.

Ahmed's discussion of the nation as the effect of bodies as they move away from some and towards others comes into sharper focus here. On the face of it, we have two bodies who move towards each other in a literal/sexual way in the paintings. But in the museum, bodies assemble for another purpose (perhaps "culture," or meeting, or education). The gallery becomes a meeting place, a filtering ground, ideologically accessible to all, but in reality privileging certain groups and connections. Naturally, the reasons people visit the Musée National Marc Chagall are many and varied. In coming to see these works, though, they are shepherded to consent to another idea. As we saw with Ahmed, love's affect brings people together in support of a common cause in the service of the nation and its (perceived) needs. Love becomes a way of uniting and authorizing a particular perspective on the marginalized and on outsiders, all while maintaining the integrity of the nation. I would be loathe to suggest something identical here, but the Song actually finds itself in some interesting territory

55 As J. Cheryl Exum highlights throughout her discussion of the pieces; 2019.

56 This is not necessarily a foreign imposition for the Song itself, where the lovers are in the city or are themselves represented by it (see Song 3:2–3; 5:6; 4:4; 5:14, 15; 6:4; 7:4). See also Christopher Meredith's important study of the Song and space, public and private (2017).

indeed, given the history of the place where it is housed, and given the current socio-political realities of France.

The history is an involved one, but briefly, the Musée National Marc Chagall is part of an important legacy which began in pre-revolutionary France and was used thereafter to great effect to establish a certain form of national identity in the Republic. This national identity is built upon an imagined consciousness that saw France as cultural leaders on the global stage.⁵⁷ Its art—now to be available to all citizens, regardless of race or background—would unite the nation and could continue to do so in the future.⁵⁸ The Louvre, which functioned as the founding museum for this consciousness-raising, installed art in such a way that it rhetorically supported the work of the revolution, elevated French culture, and served to strengthen the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty.⁵⁹ One of the implications of the Chagall museum, then, is that the Song within it seems to find itself pressed into the service of this legacy and the tacit maintenance of a particular national identity. This is a most unusual place for it in the history of reception; the Song is rarely overtly politicized in this way.⁶⁰

The vision of the art museum, to educate the citizen, was an idealistic one:

It was fitting that the museum opened on the occasion of the festival of national unity [1793], a day-long celebration orchestrated by [Jacques-Louis] David in order to bring together, in his own words, provincial politicians and black Africans, butchers and stonemasons, everyone, in other words, yearning to pledge allegiance to the New Republic. In a space such as the Louvre, free circulation and joint ownership of nationalized art would forge communal bonds of belonging and loyalty to the state sufficient to dissolve pre-existing differences of origin, class, race, and language. Recognition of mutual ties to others who were different in those respects made it possible to imagine the nation.⁶¹

This utopic ideal was troubled, however. With such a successful project at hand and such a glowing exemplar, it developed that the state began to envision that *all* the works of the great masters—including those in neighbouring states—should serve this nationalistic aim and be collected to worship at

57 Andrew McClellan 1996.

58 Andrew McClellan 1996.

59 Andrew McClellan 1996.

60 See, however, Yvonne Sherwood's essay in chapter 11 of this volume, which takes up which takes up Luther's political allegorical reading and the implications of reading the Song "publicly" and "politically."

61 Andrew McClellan 1996, 37.

the feet of the French masters. The Republic began a prolonged campaign to acquire the national treasures of other nations, under the guise of exporting “freedom” (republicanism). McClellan notes this perceived exchange—art for freedom—served to reignite a longstanding colonial aspiration of France to make Paris the cultural center of the world.⁶²

As part of this legacy then, the Song’s presence takes on a most interesting shape. In subject matter, it does not *appear* to be explicitly colonial. However, it is important to see the Musée National Marc Chagall in the context of a national network of art museums, whose self-understanding (in France and elsewhere) continued the initial impulses behind the Louvre and which to this day remain concerned with establishing and promoting certain values, among them citizenship in an egalitarian republic.⁶³ The network of national museums devoted to the great progenitors of capital-C “Culture” are thus badges of honor in the nation’s self-representation. In its witting or unwitting presence in the Musée, what then shall we deem to be the nature of the Song’s complicity in such a national project? Certainly monogamy and heteronormativity serve the imperial project, so might an intrinsic conceptualization of global ideals, such as love and spirituality as humanity’s highest expression.

It is also germane, therefore, that the *Cantiques*’ pictorial creator was “collected” as one of a number of important new French citizen contributors to the nation but who were never quite able to escape the stigma that their own national origins created. Chagall’s is the story of a talented artist in exile who was embraced in the spirit of *fraternité* by his adopted land and who loudly proclaimed that greatest and most egalitarian of all human experiences, love. However, we are reminded that Chagall’s own identity was that of an outsider, a Jew, a migrant. He was often the target of anti-Semitism or anti-migrant sentiment.⁶⁴ He was seen as an exotic artist, but it was perceived that his exoticism was born of a primitive Judaism, which was both detested and tolerated as the genesis of Christian culture.⁶⁵ He reportedly often felt that he was an outsider and could not himself forsake his beloved city, Vitebsk. On the eve of the opening of the museum, a reporter asked him about the purpose of the new space. The language of the subsequent news article indicates how Chagall belonged, but did not belong, since his near perfect French still betrayed his parochial and unstable origins. These would never be separable.

62 Andrew McClellan 1996, 37.

63 See Tony Bennett 2006; Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan 2006; Felicity Bodenstein 2011.

64 Stanley Meisler 2015, 82–3; 86–87; 106.

65 Benjamin Harshav 2006, 39.

"Everyone is asking today, what are we living for?" *Chagall said in fluent French still distinguished by the questioning and self-depreciating tones that originate in the Jewish quarter of his native town of Vitebsk.* "This expresses my search for the ideal. Parents must explain the search to their children. If they don't the children will also make bombs." Asked whether he had found the answer to the riddle of human existence, Chagall shrugged to suggest that a negative reply was self-evident. "At my age," he said nodding sadly, "now I am *verkochte kasha*." The Yiddish means *kasha*, the traditional gruel of Russia that is cooked for too long.⁶⁶

It is, as we read the reporter's words closely, not just Chagall's status as outsider that was at issue, but his Jewishness as well. Chagall was a secular Jew⁶⁷ who, with his generational counterparts understood that Jewish culture and general Western culture were contiguous.⁶⁸ Jewish myth and history had a clear link to present-day events.⁶⁹ Given this perspective and the temporal context, it would seem that his vision included Judaism as a kind of universal story, but at the same time it is clear that he did not wish to relativize it, or banish it into obscurity. This universal understanding might have been in keeping with the ideologies of the state and with those of his modernist and Jewish contemporaries, but it was not truly palatable to critics. There is clearly a tussle for Chagall. On the one hand, he made efforts to package Judaism in a way that might authenticate it, contextualizing and maybe even secularizing it for France. Judaism was one path to a higher spirituality. On the other hand, Chagall's Jewish identity was intimately tied to his ability to be an artist: he remarked that if he were not Jewish, he could not be a painter.⁷⁰ So, despite the discrimination he faced, he repeatedly integrated his Jewish origins, culture and context into his painting, often employing the stories and folklore of his early life in his work, or frequently creating an entirely new fictional world⁷¹ that was a bricolage of stories, language and symbols of the shtetl and Hasidic culture. Doubtless, the current reminders to an artistic community and a general public of his Jewishness only fueled the fires of those who were disposed to discriminate. The question, then, is what role the Song itself is made to play in such a tussle.

66 Henry Kamm Jul 8, 1973, italics emphasis added.

67 Stanley Meisler 2015: 84.

68 Benjamin Harshav 2006, 217.

69 Kenneth Silver 2013, 117.

70 Sidney Alexander 1978, 53.

71 Benjamin Harshav 2006, 35.

One side of the tussle is of greater interest to me than the other. (How) Is a Song of Songs that is enlisted into a vision of a kind of collective higher (pan?-) spirituality different from its biblical self? Though its own fit in the canon had been questioned historically,⁷² and though it does not appear to have the typical markers of a Hebrew biblical story (the deity and the covenantal trajectory), it is nonetheless profoundly embraced by the tradition. Indeed, its connections with Jewish self-understanding and theological inquiry through allegorical reception, its place in liturgical and ritual practice, and even its central position in forms of Jewish mysticism render its position in Chagall's global-faith program—if that is indeed in evidence—problematic. Unfairly, in such a reading would the Song not be asked to deny itself in both its biblical and reception-historical formulations? But this overstates the matter: As we saw, Chagall clearly embraces Judaism's history and Jewish lived practice in his works, and these call out from the canvas. It is fair to say, though, that he is offering a reformulation, both by incorporating it into the intertextual fictional world of his oeuvre⁷³ and by configuring it in the whimsical way that he does. Perhaps the point is not to consider how or to what degree the works embrace Judaism, but to ask questions that bear witness to a lived, personal and now transplanted tradition—to Chagall's Jewishness. What, for example, happens to a presentation of the Song's erotic love when it is purposed for a post-war, secular context that navigates the still-lingering effects of anti-Semitism? If there are secular or universalizing features of Chagall's Jewishness in the *Cantiques* series (or Chagall's biblical oeuvre as a whole), to what ideals are the works prompting visitors to assent? Is there, for instance, an implicit understanding that the erotic community must be heteronormative, monogamous, domesticated, *and* perhaps only a little Jewish? Or perhaps, "Jewish" only in Chagall's secularized, mystico-poetic and nostalgic way?

What seems to become clearer the more we continue in discussions of nationalism, Judaism, and eroticism is that this affective love space is marked by twists and turns, by inconsistencies that cannot be reconciled. For instance, where the Song's presence in the narrative of museum-as-nationalism is enlightening, we recall that it is thereby also included in that fuller history—the colonization of outsiders, the absorption and domestication of otherness through the practices of laïcité, and the proposed homogenization

72 See the thorough discussion in Marvin H. Pope (1977, 18–22; J. Cheryl Exum 2005, 70–73) and the important contextualizations and explanations in Ilana Pardes (1992).

73 Benjamin Harshav explains: "Chagall's fictional world is based on his own selection of representative items from several historical, cultural, and personal domains, as refracted through the prism of a self-constructed, often anecdotal, and mythologized autobiography" (2006, 35).

of the nation. One is tempted to say that might ring oddly for the Song's subject matter, and yet though it is never made explicit, we remember the text's presence in a canon that attempts (and fails) often violently to develop a homogeneous national identity. True enough, the Song's fit in this museo-nationalistic space is uneasy because its translator (Chagall) does not fit the French national story well, and Chagall's migrant experience and his continued love for this homeland percolate up through his canvases.⁷⁴ They also echo the present-day experiences of migrants in the country who continue to challenge the nation's self-understanding. As we know well, no one accurately fits the story that nationalism tells. Judaism's constant presence is here, too, both sidelined or obscured in its 1960s and 70s French context, and yet ever-present, though always configured unexpectedly. Play and whimsy in the works destabilize both the tradition and the critique. Finally, so, too is Chagall's erotic narrative unstable and incomplete. His tribute is to Vava, but his painterly homage is to another lover. In its excessive, sense-laden figuration the erotic world he paints is inviting, but it is also idealized and imaginary. Could any of us ever truly see ourselves in these convolutions?

These contradictions that are evident in the spaces between Chagall's works, the museum context and in the artist's personal story are thus experienced by the visitor too. Love (in the way I have been elaborating via Ahmed) may be the "feeling in the room," but I suspect that its particulars would require a distortion of us that would eventually end up troubling the ability of the affect to be transmitted over time. For most of us, the erotic ideal as I have elaborated it is of a contrived or politically troubling nature that would ask us to reinvent ourselves in order to fully commit. Or, to put it another way, if we are willing lovers, the object of our love is unattainable, not able to answer in a way where we might see ourselves fully. Being unattainable, Ahmed reminds us that we continue to seek it out; thus she would claim that love persists. This may be so, but it is not the utopic version that Chagall might have hoped for. In many ways, and after many years with the Song, I expect nothing else from its reception history or its publics. It seems that its own twists and turns would demand Chagall's ardor, his intensity, and our own, easily matching those of whichever contexts would press it into service.

74 And his speech. Marc Chagall writes in an open letter to Vitebsk: "All these years I never stopped having doubts: Do you understand me, my city? Do we understand each other? I kissed you with all my paint and brush strokes. And don't tell me now you don't recognize yourself" (Marc Chagall 1944).

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How to Read the Work of ‘Great Artists Who Have Done Terrible Things’

Feminist and Womanist Biblical Scholarship and the #MeToo Debate on Cultural Texts of Terror

Karen V. Guth

On September 25, 2018, actor Bill Cosby, once known as “America’s Dad,” was sentenced to three to ten years in prison for three counts of aggravated indecent assault against Andrea Constand.¹ Although the Pennsylvania Supreme Court has since overturned his conviction, citing a due process violation, the original trial followed decades of allegations from more than sixty women that Cosby had sexually assaulted them, often with use of methaqualone—acts that Cosby himself had admitted in a previous civil case.² In a more recent civil case, a California jury found that Cosby had sexually assaulted Judy Huth in 1976 when she was 16 years old, awarding her \$500,000 in damages.³ But Cosby’s fall from grace is only one recent example of “Great Artists Who Have Done Terrible Things.”⁴

In October 2017, the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* reported that over a dozen women had accused Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein of various sexual offenses.⁵ The actions alleged spanned three decades, with the *New York Times* finding records of at least eight settlements. Actresses Ashley Judd, Salma Hayek, and Uma Thurman are among those alleging that Weinstein exposed himself to them, asked them to watch him shower, and requested or offered massages. On May 25, 2018, Weinstein was arrested on separate rape charges. A Manhattan jury found him guilty of a first-degree criminal sexual act and third-degree rape on February 25, 2020, and the next month a judge

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1 Graham Bowley and Joe Coscarelli, September 25, 2018.

2 BBC News, September 26, 2018. The Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned Cosby’s conviction on June 30, 2021.

3 Graham Bowley, Lauren Herstik and Douglas Morino, June 21, 2022.

4 A.O. Scott, February 21, 2018.

5 Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, October 5, 2017.

sentenced him to twenty-three years in prison.⁶ On June 15, 2021, a New York judge ruled that Weinstein was fit to be transferred to California to face seven additional sex-crime counts,⁷ and on June 8, 2022, British authorities authorized criminal charges against Weinstein for two counts of indecent assault.⁸

On February 22, 2019, R&B singer R. Kelly was charged in Illinois on a ten-count indictment for aggravated criminal sexual abuse. The indictment came after years of allegations dating back to 1998 and featured in Lifetime's documentary, "Surviving R. Kelly."⁹ More than fifty people make allegations of violations including sexual abuse and rape of underage girls, some of it video-taped. Then on February 13, 2020, Illinois prosecutors added additional indictments against Kelly, including abuse of another minor. Kelly has also been indicted on five counts in New York and has two criminal charges pending in Minnesota.¹⁰ He was arrested in July 2019, and on September 27, 2021, he was found guilty in New York of sexual exploitation of a child, bribery, racketeering, and sex trafficking. On June 29, 2022, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison for racketeering and sex trafficking.¹¹ At the time of this writing, he was facing an additional federal trial.

These are just three examples. The list of actors, producers, comedians, writers, musicians, and other artists exposed as sexual abusers by the #MeToo movement (and of others who have had allegations made against them for years) is seemingly endless: Woody Allen, Louis C.K., Michael Jackson, Garrison Keillor, Kevin Spacey, and David Foster Wallace. And this is to say nothing of broadcasters like Matt Lauer and Charlie Rose or prominent men in other fields. These exposures have prompted much public commentary, but one question always recurs: what do we do with the work of these authorities?

This question may be receiving renewed public attention, but it is anything but new. Indeed, it is a "public" version of a question biblical interpreters have addressed for decades: what should we do with "texts of terror" canonized in sacred scripture?¹² Like those who wonder if they can still laugh at "The Cosby Show" or those who think twice about watching Allen's films, biblical scholars

6 Jan Ransom, March 11, 2020.

7 Jonah E. Bromwich and Dan Higgins, June 15, 2021.

8 Julia Jacobs, June 8, 2022.

9 Anastasia Tsioulcas, January 11, 2019.

10 Anastasia Tsioulcas, February 14, 2020.

11 Troy Closson, June 29, 2022.

12 I say "decades" because academic feminist biblical interpretation begins in the 1970s, and womanist academic biblical interpretation begins in the 1980s. But as Nyasha Junior notes, both feminist and womanist traditions of biblical interpretation have rich legacies dating to white and black women's activism in the 19th and 20th centuries. See Nyasha Junior 2015.

grapple with sacred texts tied to sexual violence.¹³ If “the biblical paradigm ... confirms our fear that canonization of texts might confer a moral authority on [the abuse they depict],”¹⁴ perhaps engaging these artists’ work condones their abuse. These cases raise the same question: what should we do with the texts of authorities who terrorize?

This essay looks to feminist and womanist biblical interpretation for insight into this question. I begin by acknowledging important differences between the question of what to do with texts whose canonization risks condoning sexual violence and that of artistic authorities who perpetrate sexual violence. Next, I show that, despite these differences, feminist and womanist biblical interpretation not only anticipates many of the questions and responses in public commentary on the #MeToo movement about artistic authorities and their work; it also reveals deficiencies in this discussion. While there is a large body of work on sexual violence and the Bible (much of it more contemporary than what I draw on here), I focus on the work of pioneering scholars Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Renita Weems, who have made some of the most enduring contributions to biblical studies and who take up texts of terror directly. Moreover, the sophistication of even their earliest work from the 1980s on the question of how to read terrifying texts surpasses that of contemporary public commentary.

I argue that the preoccupation of public commentary on the work of abusive male artists comes at the expense of analysis needed to combat sexual violence. Our focus should not be on the work of abusive male artists, but the broader cultural, structural, and institutional reforms needed to promote women’s flourishing. The title of this chapter suggests that feminists and womanists help us read cultural texts of terror, but they do so by reframing the very questions we need to ask. Rather than obsessing about male artists who abuse, we must focus on 1) challenging androcentric structures of power and authority; 2) enacting paradigm shifts that recognize women as agents, producers of knowledge, and authorities; and 3) reforming historically credentialed industries of production and interpretation. I conclude by showing how *The Song of Songs* and the interpretive work of my colleagues in this volume are ideal host-texts for demonstrating the power of biblical scholarship to contribute to these reforms.

13 Wesley Morris, June 18, 2017.

14 Joshua Cohen 1994, 293.

1 Salient Differences

We must acknowledge important differences that complicate any simple comparison of texts authored by artistic authorities who abuse and scriptural “texts of terror.”¹⁵ Among these, I would include potential differences in the nature of authorship. For example, unlike Cosby’s comedy or R. Kelly’s music, many biblical books do not have a single—or even known—author. Moreover, although we often read the Bible as a single work, it is of course a compilation of very different types of literature, written over significantly different periods of time, and in varying contexts.¹⁶ How a text becomes a “text of terror” may also differ. Some texts depict sexual violence while association with the abuses of their authors implicates others. We should also consider how differences of authority—whether sacred, artistic, or moral—affects the comparison. Moreover, there is the type and scale of influence to consider. These differences and others are important, but I focus here on the formal similarity that connects these seemingly disparate cases: the question of what to do with the work of authorities who terrorize. Do these authors’ violations affect their authority, and if so, how? Should audiences continue to enjoy their work, and if so how? What sorts of cultural, societal, institutional, or other systemic issues are involved? To explore these questions, I draw on feminist and womanist biblical interpreters whose approaches to biblical texts of terror anticipate the full range of responses to questions at the center of the #MeToo debate.

2 Anticipation

Despite important differences between the question of what to do with the work of artistic authorities who abuse and the question of how to read biblical texts of terror, biblical interpreters anticipate many of the proposals in public discussion on cultural texts of terror.¹⁷ If Phyllis Trible’s *Texts of Terror* “documents the case against women” in the Hebrew Bible, the #MeToo movement reveals that, far from limited to the ancient world, male violence is an ever-present reality.¹⁸ While post-Christian feminists reject as hopelessly misogynist the authoritative traditions of faith that canonize terror-filled texts,

15 For a full discussion of these differences, see Karen V. Guth 2022.

16 Thanks to Simeon Chavel for pointing out these distinctions.

17 For a full comparison of these responses, see Karen V. Guth 2022.

18 Phyllis Trible 1984.

there are those who revoke Cosby's moral authority due to his violations.¹⁹ Like believers who ban biblical texts that prescribe their subordination,²⁰ some music lovers #MuteRKelly. And just as some biblical interpreters reinterpret familiar texts or highlight neglected ones, so too do some critics call for reassessment of Allen's oeuvre or look to Cosby's life to spotlight lesser-known roles.²¹ Finally, in the same way that biblical interpreters relocate authority to other authors or texts, many cultural commentators shift attention from the question of what to do with the work of authorities who terrorize to that of healing for female victims.²²

If some biblical interpreters anticipate these responses, others illuminate their deficiencies. While Trible's analysis of biblical "texts of terror" was ground-breaking, it is only the beginning. Other feminist and womanist work shows the necessity of expanding the analysis, as texts that depict sexual terror are but an especially vivid example of "texts of terror." The much larger problems are the androcentric nature of biblical (and artistic) canons at large and the androcentric nature of institutions of biblical (and artistic) production and interpretation. If we want to understand the full scope of the problem and to propose adequate solutions, we must press beyond the question of what to do with the work of abusive artists. In the next section, I show how the approaches of Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems can expand and enrich public debate. Their work reframes the questions to be asked and identifies a fuller range of issues at stake.

3 Illumination

3.1 *The Problem: Larger Than a Few Texts of Terror and Broader Than Sexual Violence*

The problem is larger than texts associated with sexual violence and broader than sexual violence *per se*. The deeper issue is the androcentric,

19 Wesley Morris, June 18, 2017.

20 Renita Weems, for example, tells the story of Howard Thurman's grandmother, who lived through slavery. She could not read and when Howard would read the Bible to her, she told him to skip over the epistles of Paul used by her enslaver to justify her enslavement. By refusing to read these portions of scripture, she denies them sacred status. See Renita Weems 1991, 69.

21 A.O. Scott, January 31, 2018; and Wesley Morris, June 18, 2017.

22 Judd Apatow directs attention away from male abusers to their victims. See Sarah Lyall and Dave Itzkoff, November 24, 2017. I should note that some critics regard portions of Apatow's work as sexist, and he personally rejects the label "feminist." See David Marchese, August 2017. See also Wesley Morris, November 22, 2017.

or male-oriented, nature of authority and texts. In this sense, both scholars expand conceptions of what constitutes texts of terror. This category includes but cannot be limited to texts that depict or are implicated in sexual violence. These texts are but obvious manifestations of a pervasive male power that shapes the entire Bible (and contemporary centers of artistic production). Men wrote biblical texts for men with male purposes in mind. They reflect and reinforce their patriarchal contexts. Schüssler Fiorenza's approach takes these "androcentric" and "patriarchal functions" of the Bible as the starting point and then questions "the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests of contemporary biblical interpretation."²³ Recognizing the male-centered nature of the text, its history of interpretation, and current institutions of biblical scholarship are crucial elements of her approach.²⁴ This applies not only to texts depicting sexual violence or prescribing female subordination, but also to seemingly neutral texts used to patriarchal effect. There is no biblical text exempt from operating as a text of terror.

Weems makes a similar point about the metaphors of the Hebrew prophets. She emphasizes the patriarchal nature of these texts, their male authorship and readership. These texts take for granted male power over women: "Not only is male dominance assumed in the Old Testament; it is not questioned."²⁵ The prophets employ metaphors that both reflect and reinforce male dominance. These metaphors "promote a world that is hierarchical, that demonizes and marginalizes women, and that rationalizes violence."²⁶ Because the assumed audience is male, these texts impose "social conditioning to a male perspective"²⁷ on women who read them.

Even more importantly, Weems draws attention to the heightened vulnerability of African American female readers, marginalized by race, gender, and class.²⁸ The Bible has been used to oppress them not only with respect to gender, but also racial and class identities. Enslavers and others used the Bible to legitimate slavery, and "ruling interpretive communities" use the Bible to enforce androcentric and "in the case of the Anglo-feminist readings, class-centered and ethnically chauvinistic" readings.²⁹ Given the multitude of ways the biblical text can function as an instrument of oppression against African American women, analysis cannot remain exclusively focused on texts

23 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 15–16.

24 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 53.

25 Renita Weems 1995, 86.

26 Renita Weems 1995, 85.

27 Renita Weems 1995, 89.

28 Renita Weems 1991, 66.

29 Renita Weems 1991, 67.

that depict sexualized violence. Reading the Bible requires African American women to “identify with texts written by those in power for those in power against the powerless,” potentially rendering the entire canon a text of terror.³⁰

Importantly, Weems notes that the Bible does not differ from other classics in this regard. “To read many of the classic texts of Western literature,” she writes, “one must be willing to identify with male interests and male values and not question the absence of strong women, not notice that those women who are strong wind up killed, branded, or left insane.”³¹ Schüssler Fiorenza reiterates this point: “not only the Bible but all cultural classics are determined by the patriarchal politics of the androcentric text.”³² Androcentric texts may differ in degree from those implicated in sexual violence, but as Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems indicate, they too are texts of terror in that they participate in larger structures of power that render the marginalized vulnerable. The connection these scholars make between the Bible and other texts in the Western literary canon only reinforces the relevance of their insights about the Bible to contemporary artistic canons. While current cultural commentary questions the moral status of art implicated in sexual violence, Weems and Schüssler Fiorenza clarify the preliminary nature of these questions. Cultural commentary requires deeper analysis of how the work of abusive artists is part of larger legacies of influence that both reflect and reinforce larger structures of male domination.

Indeed, the male-oriented nature of the Bible and other classics often ties authority itself to maleness. The normativity of male authority that positions female subordination as the will of God is exacerbated by certain conceptions of biblical authority. Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, identifies three primary models of biblical authority, versions of which appear in the #MeToo debate. The first, the “doctrinal paradigm,” which “conceives of authority and truth claims of the Bible in ahistorical, dogmatic terms,” is particularly dangerous, especially when combined with androcentrism of the text itself.³³ This model refuses the human role in the authorship of texts, insisting that the Bible is the unmediated revelation of God. Its truth is inerrant and its authority is absolute. It views the Bible as “a miraculous, divine book.”³⁴ This model provides a divine warrant for the androcentrism of the text, positioning God’s authority as male and women’s oppression as God’s immutable word. Although

30 Renita Weems 1991, 73.

31 Renita Weems 1995, 89.

32 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 35. See also 198.

33 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 25.

34 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984. For discussion of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s “historical” and “pastoral-theological models,” see 28–36.

not named as such, this model appears in contemporary commentary of artistic work.

Biblical interpreters can shed light on contemporary debate if we use their models of biblical authority to name the unarticulated yet undergirding conceptions of male authority often operative in public commentary. Take the doctrinal model, for example. While certainly not denying that Allen produces his films or that Cosby writes his comedy, many people regard artists as mediums who communicate unassailable truths. The doctrinal status of their work results in calls to separate the artist's life and work. If the work is significant, violations are excused. While few, if any, would claim divine authority for these artists, this view nevertheless assigns them a divine-like authority despite their transgressions.³⁵ And comparing male artists with God is not far-fetched. Many feminists theorize a causal relationship between male representations of the Divine and men's societal power. As Mary Daly famously put it, "If God is male, then the male is God."³⁶ The #MeToo movement reveals art to be equally implicated in power structures that privilege men and position them as gods.

Megan Garber's compelling analysis of novelist David Foster Wallace provides a good example of how the doctrinal model functions in public discussion, undergirding the idea of male artists as god-like figures.³⁷ Wallace's abuse of fellow writer, Mary Karr, is often dismissed with appeals to what Garber describes as "the dangerous romance of male genius." Noting the male etymology of the word genius in Latin, Garber tracks the ways "the biases of the language remain with us" in the inability to recognize genius in women and the propensity to excuse the violations of men regarded as geniuses. "This is the thing we do to women in a world of biased idolatry," she writes, "Genius, a means to godliness and its best evidence, cannot be argued with. Genius cannot be reasoned with. Genius is the reason and the question. It will be heard. It will be respected. Even when it kicks and stalks and climbs up the side of a house at night." Garber's use of religious terminology is appropriate: Genius is "an object of worship"; the basis for "idolatry"; "a fealty to genius is its own kind of faith: in transcendence, in exceptionalism, in the fact that the gods, still, can walk among us." Granted, those who defend male artistic genius at the expense of women's well-being do not use terms like "doctrinal," but their defense often assumes this model.

35 Indeed, even treating Bill Cosby as the sole "author" of "The Cosby Show" or Woody Allen as the sole "author" of films he writes, directs, or produces—as though there are not hundreds of people involved in their production—only reinforces the idea of the male author as a god-like figure. Thanks to Alexis Wolf for this point.

36 Mary Daly 1973, 19.

37 Megan Garber, May 9, 2018.

For Schüssler Fiorenza, part of the solution to Garber's problem as it pertains to the Bible is to challenge the doctrinal paradigm by acknowledging the historical and social context of texts and the human role in their authorship and canonization. Such a hermeneutics of suspicion uncovers the ways the text reflects and promotes male interests. It "takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions. Since most of the biblical writings are ascribed to male authors and most of the biblical interpreters in church and academy are men, such an assumption is justified."³⁸ This approach "critically enter[s] the biblical worlds and the works of scholars in order to detect their ideological deformations."³⁹

Similarly, Weems notes that for African American women simply reading the Bible is a "subversive" act, given the ways the text reflects and reinforces domination of the marginalized.⁴⁰ "A challenge for marginalized readers in general, and African American women in particular," she writes, "has been to use whatever means necessary to recover the voice of the oppressed within biblical texts."⁴¹ More recent womanist biblical interpretation carries this insight forward, describing such readings as "dangerous"⁴² for the ways they challenge the "multilayered and interlocking systems of oppression ... that keep all women of color, locally and globally, stymied in racialized pits of poverty, violence, and despair."⁴³ For these interpreters, the problem is not androcentrism or patriarchy as such, but all forms of domination. Contesting male-centered conceptions of authority via a hermeneutics of suspicion is critical, then, not only for biblical hermeneutics, but also for the #MeToo discussion.

Schüssler Fiorenza's and Weems' attention to the various forms of oppression operative in biblical texts is also instructive for #MeToo commentators. In keeping with womanist emphasis on the triple jeopardy of race, gender, and class, Weems highlights the impact of oppressive texts on marginalized readers. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies the problem as "kyriarchy:" "the interstructuring system of sexism, racism, classism, and colonialism"⁴⁴ founded in the structures of domination of ancient Greece that restricted citizenship

38 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 15–16.

39 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 148.

40 Renita Weems 1991, 71.

41 Renita Weems 1991, 73.

42 Emilie M. Townes 2016, 361.

43 Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace 2016, 8.

44 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 248; See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 43; 113–15.

to “Greek propertied, freeborn, male heads of households.”⁴⁵ Construing patriarchy solely in terms of male-domination leaves these other forms of dominations un-examined.

Despite the merits of Garber’s analysis, it is not sufficient to analyze male power in isolation from other forms of domination. Garber’s piece illuminates unspoken associations of maleness with godliness, but fails, for example, to address race. Her focus on the victimization of a white female artist by a white male counterpart is representative of much of the cultural commentary in its prioritizing of white women’s victimization over the suffering of black women. Here again, as womanists note, the Bible is paradigmatic: the neglect suffered by women of color in the Bible, like Hagar, is all too familiar for women of color today. And white women are among their oppressors.

These same dynamics are all too obvious in the #MeToo debate. Although black female activist Tarana Burke coined the phrase “Me Too” in 2006, it was not until white actress Alyssa Milano appropriated it that the movement received wide-spread attention. Others speculate that it took decades for allegations against R. Kelly to be taken seriously because his victims were primarily black women.⁴⁶ Lisa Woolfolk describes this neglect with Moya Bailey’s term “misogynoir,” “a unique form of contempt for black women and girls” that is an American legacy dating to slavery and perpetuates the “social assumption ... that black women and girls are disposable.”⁴⁷ Only recently have some begun to acknowledge misogynoir as the source of their neglect of black women. In “Surviving R. Kelly,” Chance the Rapper states it explicitly: “I didn’t value the accusers’ stories because they were black women.”⁴⁸ Clearly, the #MeToo movement has only begun to shed light on the pervasiveness of violence against all women. There seems to be a cultural consensus that sexual violence is a warrant to question the moral status of work by abusers. That some of this analysis questions the cultural association of maleness with divinity and authority is significant. But the attention feminists and womanists pay to larger kyriarchal structures is needed in the #MeToo debate, lest it retain an overly-narrow understanding of what constitutes texts—indeed, contexts—of terror.

45 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 108. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2016, 8–9, 45.

46 Lisa Woolfolk, February 15, 2019.

47 Lisa Woolfolk February 15, 2019.

48 Lisa Woolfolk February 15, 2019.

3.2 *Structure of Domination beyond Texts*

Along with uncovering the androcentric nature of the text, feminists and womanists reveal inextricable links between androcentric texts and societal structures. Texts that depict sexual violence and otherwise androcentric texts have much to teach about the functioning of kyriarchal power in the larger culture. Weems emphasizes the connection between biblical metaphors and societal power structures that give them meaning. She suggests abusive metaphors in the Hebrew prophets “work” because they tap into the context and expectations of their audience. The marriage metaphor “concurred that God was male”; “upheld belief in male power and female subjugation”; “capitulated to the idea of a violent, retaliatory God”; and “maintained male prestige and honor codes.”⁴⁹ These metaphors continue to work today because of our own culture of violence against women.⁵⁰

We have only to look around and examine the artifacts of our day—the headlines, billboards, commercials, advertisements, magazine covers, and the lyrics to our songs—to notice our own modern culture’s fascination with sex and violence. The fact that women are much more likely to be the victims of sex and violent crimes than they are to be the perpetrators of such crimes must be kept in mind. Every three seconds somewhere around the world a woman is being beaten, and every three minutes somewhere a woman is being raped.⁵¹

In other words, ancient metaphors are every bit contemporary. Like ancient audiences, we understand these texts because they both reflect larger cultural realities about violence against women and reinforce structures of power that allow that violence.

Although there are hints of such awareness in #MeToo commentary, full recognition of how texts belong to larger structures of domination is strikingly absent. Scott, for example, criticizes himself and other film critics for not taking allegations against Allen seriously. He reveals an increasing recognition of his own and Allen’s participation in the film industry’s patriarchy. “What I find most ethically troubling about Mr. Allen’s work at present,” he writes, “is the extent to which I and so many of my colleagues have ignored or minimized its uglier aspects.”⁵² Despite this self-criticism and call for reassessment of

49 Renita Weems 1995, 78.

50 Renita Weems 1995, 10–11.

51 Renita Weems 1995, 10–11.

52 A.O. Scott, January 31, 2018.

Allen's work, his commentary remains focused on what the allegations mean for Allen's films. It does not account for the formative influence Allen's films have already wielded on persons, on the industry, or in the culture at large. Ultimately, his call is not in the service of women's liberation or transforming the industry, stopping short of what Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems identify as critical next steps: a) to recognize women as subjects, agents, and producers of knowledge—indeed, artistic authorities in their own right—and b) to transform oppressive structures.

3.3 *The Need for a Paradigm Shift: Women as Agents, Producers of Knowledge, Authorities*

Feminists and womanists call for a paradigm shift that recognizes women as agents, producers of knowledge, and authorities in their own right. This failure pervades #MeToo commentary. Even those who call for a shift of attention from male abusers to women survivors and their work, still attend to women qua victims and work that is lost. Judd Apatow's response is representative here: "What happens to [the work of these men is] 'the least important question' on the table. All our energy should be with the victims. ... What happened to them?. ... What could we do going forward to support them ...?"⁵³ It is laudable that Apatow directs attention away from male abusers, but his shift is to women as victims. Similarly, reflecting on Annabella Sciorra's career, Morris writes: "Whatever kind of counterrevolution this turns out to be, much of it, so far, has necessarily been about the actions and art of men ... With their victims, it's the opposite: How does what's been done to them bear out in art they never got to make?"⁵⁴ While Morris' commentary acknowledges how the discussion is framed in male abusers' terms at the expense of women and their art, his analysis depicts Sciorra as a once great actress, now the victim of lost opportunities, rather than acknowledging that she has continued to produce great art in spite of the violations she suffered. Such analysis risks relegating women to the permanent status of victims.⁵⁵

Women are not merely victims of male artists but agents and authorities in their own right. As both Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems note, the androcentric perspective and language of the Bible often renders women invisible, but women are not absent from biblical history.⁵⁶ To uncover an authentic

53 Sarah Lyall and Dave Itzkoff 2017.

54 Wesley Morris 2017.

55 One problem with biblical readings *in memorium*, like Tribble's, is they relegate women to the role of victims in perpetuity. Thanks to my student Elisaveta Mavrodieva for this point.

56 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 3; Renita Weems 1995, 30.

women's history, Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist critical biblical hermeneutics advocates the "undertaking of writing wo/men's history as feminist heritage."⁵⁷ This approach moves beyond seeing women as victims, regarding them instead as moral agents and courageous resisters. She argues that women's "heritage is misrepresented when it is understood solely as a history of patriarchal oppression; it must also be reconstituted as a history of liberation and religious agency."⁵⁸ Her hermeneutics of remembrance enables women to reclaim their biblical heritage.⁵⁹ Re-assessing the work of artists who abuse is insufficient: artistic industries, like the Bible, must be recognized as women's "birthright."⁶⁰ Women are "not only ... victims, but also ... historical interlocutors and agents."⁶¹ Just as Schüssler Fiorenza bids women to "claim the center of biblical religion and refuse to relinquish its inheritance,"⁶² so too should women claim artistic centers of production as their heritage.

Claiming the biblical center is perhaps even more important for African American women. As Weems notes, because enslavers prevented the enslaved from learning to read, they were denied not only their "birthright" to the biblical text, but also "any substantive heritage in the printed word."⁶³ She details the ways African American interpretation is deeply rooted in these realities and the many approaches black women and womanists use to resist this exclusion. In *Just a Sister Away*, Weems re-writes familiar biblical stories from the perspective of women. She imaginatively reconstructs their thoughts and feelings, bringing these oft-neglected characters to life and providing "a fuller, more egalitarian reconstruction of biblical history."⁶⁴ Still other women of color, like Howard Thurman's grandmother, choose which biblical texts are authoritative based on their own experience of oppression and liberation.⁶⁵ Rather than the doctrinal approach that views the text as an immutable

57 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 8. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes women in "fractured form" because it "problematize[s] the category of 'woman,'" "show[s] that wo/men are not a homogenous social group but are fragmented through structures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, heterosexuality, colonialism, and age," and challenges "andro-kyriocentric language which subsumes 'woman' under the generic 'man, mankind'" (2014, 2). It includes men and other marginalized persons.

58 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 20.

59 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 20.

60 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 106.

61 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 93.

62 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 107.

63 Renita Weems 1991, 68.

64 Renita Weems 1991, 69.

65 Renita Weems 1991, 69.

authority, these strategies claim women's authority to interpret the Bible as "an authoritative resource" rather than "a domineering authority."⁶⁶

This emphasis on women's agency goes hand in hand with insistence on women's authority as interpreters of biblical traditions and producers of knowledge. Because of their "systemic exclusion from scholarship and intellectual influence," Schüssler Fiorenza bids women to "become involved in the production and distribution of knowledge."⁶⁷ For both Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems, it is not the Bible that holds authority but its interpreters. Rather than identifying a hermeneutical key within scripture, Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist critical hermeneutics locates interpretive authority in the "ekklēsia of wo/men," or as she has more recently translated it, the "congress of wo/men."⁶⁸ Ekklēsia is the Greek word for the democratic assembly of full citizens, invoking an egalitarian model of biblical interpretation.⁶⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza translates the term as "congress of wo/men" to avoid identification of ekklēsia with "church" and adds "wo/men" to place women at the center of biblical interpretation and signal that this radical egalitarian ethos has not been fully realized. She establishes women's experience of emancipatory struggles as the criteria for determining which biblical texts are authoritative. For her, "the litmus test for invoking Scripture as the Word of God must be whether or not biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation."⁷⁰ Her feminist critical hermeneutics "accepts or rejects" texts "as well as their political social functions according to its own canon of liberation."⁷¹

To locate authority in the experiences of the marginalized who struggle for liberation is not the mere "believability" in accounts of the #MeToo movement where women's stories of abuse are finally deemed credible. On Schüssler Fiorenza's account, women are not merely authorities on their own experience, but interpretive authorities more generally. Women are the arbiters of biblical authority, and in the case of the #MeToo discussion, of artistic authority. Indeed, she notes that her approach need not be restricted to the Bible; it also applies to cultural classics.⁷²

66 Emilie M. Townes 2016, 361.

67 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, xiii.

68 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2016, 109–111.

69 See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2007, 72–3.

70 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, xiii.

71 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 92.

72 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 75.

Weems adopts a related strategy, privileging the power of readers over the rhetorical strategies of authors.⁷³ As she puts it, “People have power, not texts.”⁷⁴ “Readers should have the right,” she writes, “to question which visions offered by the Bible’s writers are worth devoting one’s energies to implementing in the world. Those visions readers decide are not worth inhabiting—that is, the ones that call for slaughtering and silencing others—should be critiqued and resisted.”⁷⁵ Like Schüssler Fiorenza’s feminist critical hermeneutics, Weems’ approach rejects a doctrinal model that assumes the Bible’s inerant authority and instead emphasizes a hermeneutics of suspicion, one that uncovers male domination in the text. She suggests that theological truth is not inherent in the text but conferred by its readers. This insight bears similarities to Schüssler Fiorenza’s understanding of the Bible as a site of memory and struggle that demands discernment with regard to the competing visions presented in the text. Just as Schüssler Fiorenza posits the liberation of the oppressed as her hermeneutical key, Weems identifies an emancipatory criterion for determining which texts retain authority and which demand resistance:

Reading texts such as the ones in the prophetic corpus that sensationalize violence against women requires readers to find out how, if at all, violence—even in the form of divine punishment—improves the world. ... Readers have the right to reject living in worlds that in the end diminish their humanity.⁷⁶

It is therefore up to readers—especially marginalized readers—to decide whether the vision offered in the biblical texts retain value.⁷⁷ “What effect,” she asks, “does reading descriptions of women battered, mutilated, and raped as a poetic device for divine judgment have on audiences who have been raped and battered?”⁷⁸ Weems herself (like Thurman’s grandmother) rejects such texts as revelatory of God. Just as Schüssler Fiorenza relocates authority from the text to the congress of wo/men, Weems asserts the rights of readers, especially marginalized ones, to decide which biblical texts are authoritative.

73 Renita Weems 1995, 85.

74 Renita Weems 2003, 26.

75 Renita Weems 1995, 103.

76 Renita Weems 1995, 104.

77 Renita Weems 1995, 85.

78 Renita Weems 1995, 85. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza would categorize such a reading as a hermeneutics of evaluation. See 2007, 187.

In short, women and otherwise marginalized readers are arbiters of biblical authority—and, in the case of the #MeToo discussion, artistic authority.

This claiming of women's authority is especially important given the power of these texts and their wide-ranging influence. Both Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems recognize the power of the Bible and other classics beyond their intended audiences or communities of accountability, revealing problems with strategies that involve banning the text or revoking texts' or artists' authority. These strategies neglect what Schüssler Fiorenza calls the "political" function of texts,⁷⁹ the fact that "biblical texts affect the perceptions, values, and imagination not only of Christians, but of Western cultures and societies," and not only Christian women, but "all women in Western society."⁸⁰ For this reason, it is not enough to ban the text; we must critically assess it to challenge the wider effects of its discourses.⁸¹ The Bible is part of a wider legacy whose influence extends not only into the past, but also in the present and future and therefore needs to be engaged to undercut its destructive power. Banning texts of terror sidesteps the problem: its patriarchal power extends well beyond audiences who deem the Bible authoritative.

Likewise, refusing to watch "The Cosby Show" or muting R. Kelly does not resolve the dilemma. Rather, this decision buys into a doctrinal view that leaves the rhetorical and political functions of these texts and their authors unexamined. It bans the text only to neglect the influence the text has already exerted. Moreover, even seemingly neutral texts can be used to oppress.⁸² All texts must therefore be critically assessed via "a hermeneutics of proclamation critically evaluating what can be proclaimed ... as an inspired vision for a more human life and future."⁸³

While some #MeToo commentary recognizes the expansive power of texts, it seems less able to perform the de-authorization for which Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems call. Scott, for example, recognizes the widespread power art wields when he notes the difficulty of un-watching a film. But he expresses this inevitability as a lament, or excuse even, for continuing to authorize those who terrorize. Just because one cannot un-watch Allen's work does not mean it must retain its authority. As Schüssler Fiorenza contends, critical engagement with oppressive texts is necessary—not because we cannot un-read them, but because we need to de-authorize them. Scott's emphasis on the inevitability

79 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 101.

80 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 47; 7.

81 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 135.

82 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 18.

83 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 148.

of not being able to “un-see” or “unlearn” a work of art suffers the same problem Schüssler Fiorenza identifies with “canon within a canon” or “correlation” approaches: it still treats the text as authoritative archetype, risking an apologetics for text and/or author.⁸⁴ Scott misses the critical point: the issue is not watching or un-watching, learning or un-learning, but authorizing and de-authorizing.

It is telling that none of the #MeToo commentary identifies women or marginalized readers as interpretive authorities. The closest it comes is when commentators articulate hopes about future work that female artists might make once male abusers lose their power. For example, Ben Travers, television critic at IndieWire, focuses on the work women are now free to do. “A lot of people are hoping this is more of a turning point, that the work that’s being lost won’t be missed because the work that’s being gained will be better,” he says, “The people who were silenced and thrown out and kept from working by these predators will be able to go forward and thrive.”⁸⁵ Travers’ approach has the benefit of moving from attention to women as victims to that of artistic authorities. But he fails to diagnose the systemic nature of the problem, identifying the problem as a few bad apples. He does not account for either the larger legacies of which these artists’ work is already a part and their influence or the structural injustice that enabled and sustained them. In the absence of expansive reforms of artistic industries, the work Travers hopes for will likely remain uncreated. His commentary on how the #MeToo movement may enable future generations of women to flourish as artistic authorities resonates with Schüssler Fiorenza’s insistence on women’s involvement in artistic production, but fails to identify the “paradigm shift” that “challenges the androcentric frameworks of the discipline as a whole.”⁸⁶ This is the critical shift for which Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems call.

3.4 *The Transformation of Biblical Studies and Artistic Centers of Production*

This paradigm shift requires the reform of historically credentialed industries and their democratization. Schüssler Fiorenza articulates the goal of critical feminist biblical studies as effecting “a paradigm shift that conceptualizes biblical studies as a rhetoric and ethics of inquiry intended to engender change and transformation.”⁸⁷ Such a change produces “not only new knowledge but also

84 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 13, 87.

85 Sarah Lyall and Dave Itzkoff, 2017.

86 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 109.

87 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 373.

new institutions.”⁸⁸ She calls for transforming biblical studies and its processes of professionalism to democratize biblical reading.⁸⁹ This means challenging its “allegedly interest-free and value-neutral objectivist” paradigms, methods, pedagogies, procedures of validation, and styles of reasoning.⁹⁰ Biblical studies belongs not to the elite males credentialed by a patriarchal academy, but rather to “women-church.”⁹¹

In a related vein, Weems identifies her aim in *Just a Sister Away* as speaking to African American women not in the academy but “in Bible study groups, women’s gatherings, workshops, and over coffee.”⁹² She identifies the goal of a womanist hermeneutics of liberation as “empower[ing] African American women as readers, as agents, and as shapers of discourse.”⁹³ More recently, womanist biblical interpretation has articulated this commitment in terms of Alice Walker’s definitional womanist commitment to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.”⁹⁴ These interpreters insist that interpretation of the Bible “cannot be done independent of the communities with whom we read and to whom we are accountable ... interpreters of sacred texts are responsible for exposing and analyzing power dynamics ... that have been used to further injustices and global systemic challenges.”⁹⁵

4 What to Do with This Work? Reframing the Questions and Responses

It is not enough, then, to obsess over the work of male artists who abuse. Nor is it sufficient to memorialize victims. We need to recognize the expansive power of this work and reform the patriarchal structures of society and artistic production that enable and sustain them. The #MeToo movement reveals that the same kyriarchal dynamics in biblical texts and interpretation operate in society and art today: the tendencies to treat male artists as gods, the presence of male-dominated societal structures, and patriarchal domination of centers

88 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 373. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1999; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 167–194; 2007, 239–266.

89 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2007, 244. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2009.

90 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2014, 373. See also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, 118; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 2007, 245–8.

91 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1984, xxiv. This is an early articulation of her hermeneutical model. As noted in the essay, her terminology has evolved over the course of her career.

92 Renita Weems 1988, x.

93 Renita Weems 2003, 25.

94 As quoted in Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, 2016, 2.

95 Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace 2016, 15.

of artistic production. Questions about the moral status of perpetrators' work are not unimportant. But more important are questions about the larger legacies of which this work is a part and about the power structures that reflect and reinforce their destructive effects in our centers of cultural production. It is striking how little #MeToo commentary proposes the reform of oppressive practices in the relevant industries. That most commentators continue to frame questions about "the bad men" and "what to do with their work," reveals that the discussion remains beholden to patriarchal power. Even analysis most sympathetic to women, focuses on them as victims of abuse and lost art rather than authoritative agents of production.

Consequently, none of the common responses proposed in public debate are sufficient for achieving the transformations Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems envision. As strategies, "documenting the case against women" and shifting focus to female victims may uncover female abuse and suffering, but they neglect women's agency and authority as producers of knowledge. Banning the text or rejecting the author's authority may express appropriate censure, but reinforces doctrinal models of authority, neglecting the political power of texts. Highlighting neglected texts and reinterpretation strategies may relocate authority from oppressive strands to liberating ones, but still treat texts as authoritative archetypes rather than sites of struggle.⁹⁶

Nothing short of claiming justice for the marginalized as the authoritative criterion of interpretation and production will do. As Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems contend, it is not enough to uncover kyriarchal dynamics in the ancient world; we must identify and resist them today. The real concern is not just for "a feminist reconstruction of the past, but also for the transformation of the present."⁹⁷ We must lift up the important roles women have always played in artistic centers of production, rather than reducing them to mere victims of great male artists. We need, as black feminist Traci C. West puts it, to "recognize women as occupying the moral center."⁹⁸

5 The Song of Songs

Enter the Song of Songs. I have argued that biblical scholars possess the power to address pressing issues highlighted by the #MeToo movement. More specifically, feminist and womanist discussion of biblical texts of terror identify and

96 See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 148.

97 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza 1992, 198.

98 Traci C. West 1999, 184.

offer resources to address deficiencies in public commentary on the recurring question of what to do with the work of male artists who abuse. Amplifying the insights of Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems, I have demonstrated the need for a fundamental paradigm shift in the way we conceive of artistic authority and indeed the very questions that we need to ask in the wake of sexual abuse perpetrated by male artists. Rather than obsessing about the authority or work of male artists who abuse, the moral imperative is to challenge androcentric structures of power and authority; recognize women as agents, producers of knowledge, and authorities; and reform historically credentialed industries of production and interpretation. The *Song of Songs* and the interpretive work of my colleagues in this volume are ideal host-texts for considering the power of biblical scholarship to contribute to public discourse on women.

The *Song* recommends itself, in part, because it reflects the perennial challenges that these mandates aim to address. Although the *Song* is the only biblical text to feature the voices of women, it is not immune from operating as a text of terror (see, for example, the watchmen and beating scenes in 3:3 and 5:7). Moreover, even with a strong female protagonist, the *Song* reveals the abiding androcentric power of the Bible. It presents, as Elaine James describes it, “the conundrum of how a text so celebratory of female eroticism also witnesses to and encodes gendered forms of domination.”⁹⁹ And it is not merely the text that presents such a conundrum; its interpretation and reception history are beholden to similar dynamics. As Anna Marsh notes, despite the centrality of female voices in the *Song*, the canonization process was “guided by patriarchal hands.” The female voices of the *Song* have long confounded interpreters, some of whose “allegorization of clear, powerful female speech about sex in the *Song of Songs* disinherits the original female speakers of their story.”¹⁰⁰ And Marsh demonstrates that this phenomenon has clear corollaries in contemporary discourse when women’s voices “go public.” Even a female commentator such as Hildegard of Bingen interpreted the *Song* within a framework consistent with the “masculinist hierarchy of the church.”¹⁰¹ In one sense, then, the *Song* replicates the very problems Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems identify with troubling biblical texts and that I have identified in public debate of male artistic authority.

But if the *Song* reproduces these problems, it also resists them. The female protagonist of the *Song* is as self-possessed a biblical character as they come. She defies the androcentric strictures of her day and is the very picture of

99 Elaine James June 3–5, 2019, 13.

100 Anna Marsh June 3–5, 2019, 1.

101 Karl Shuve June 3–5, 2019, 14.

female agency. As Chip Dobbs-Allsopp points out, “there is no more agential female voice in all of the Bible than that of the young woman of the Song. ... She betokens a vibrant, knowing agency. The young woman throughout the Song is someone who knows her own mind and acts on it. Infused with intention, initiative, self-assurance, and energy, she takes charge from the outset.”¹⁰² I would add to Dobbs-Allsopp’s insightful characterization that the female lover is not only the authoritative agent that Schüssler Fiorenza and Weems champion, but that she is so especially with respect to her sexuality. In this way, the celebration of the protagonist’s sexuality—and more particularly, her ownership of it—at the heart of the Song provides a welcome counter to the sexualized abuse of women, especially women of color, spotlighted by the #MeToo movement. Other contributors here highlight important feminist and queer interpretation of the Song,¹⁰³ and as both Deborah Green and Karl Shuve show, the history of the Song’s interpretation in both Jewish and Christian traditions is more complex than any simple characterization as “patriarchal” would suggest. Even the rabbis produce “sex positive” and “female positive” interpretation,¹⁰⁴ and non-feminists like Hildegard nevertheless manage to “re-voice” the text, “eliding the distinction between the biblical text and her commentary.”¹⁰⁵ The Song does not merely capitulate to androcentrism then; it also challenges it.

The engagement of my colleagues with these and other elements of the Song seems to me an important step in reforming the historically credentialed industries of production and interpretation that Schüssler Fiorenza identifies as critical to biblical scholarship. Their work demonstrates the vital difference such challenges make to a male-dominated discipline—although as Nyasha Junior notes, there is more work to do when it comes to implementing an intersectional framework attentive to “misogynoir.”¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, aspects of the Song itself and the interpretive work of my colleagues here model what it looks like to challenge androcentric authority structures within biblical studies, to recognize women not merely as agents but also authoritative producers of knowledge, and to reform historically credentialed institutions of biblical interpretation and production. Perhaps most importantly, these authorities on the Song demonstrate the power of biblical studies, so conceived, to speak to the pressing political and moral issues of our day.

102 F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp June 3–5, 2019, 2.

103 See, for example, Rhiannon Graybill June 3–5, 2019.

104 Deborah Green June 3–5, 2019.

105 Karl Shuve June 3–5, 2019.

106 Nyasha Junior June 3–5, 2019.

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The Song of Songs is the only book of the Bible to privilege the voice of a woman, and its poetry of love and eroticism also bears witness to violence. How do the contemporary #MeToo movement and other movements of protest and accountability renew questions about women, gender, sex, and the problematic of the public at the heart of this ancient poetry? This edited volume seeks to reinvigorate feminist scholarship on the Song by exploring diverse contexts of reading, from Akkadian love lyrics, to Hildegard of Bingen, to Marc Chagall.

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